

The Peter Saga – Between a Rock and a Stumbling Block
Sunday, August 31, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

One of my favorite authors and preachers, Herbert O’Driscoll, says at the heart of all human experience and history is the choice ... to live and act in a relationship with God. Isn’t that what we are hearing today? In Exodus, Moses hears God call and responds, “Here I am” ... and a relationship is begun. Paul speaks in Romans today what it means to be in relationship with Christ, and that we are to overcome evil with good. In Matthew, we see Peter’s relationship with Jesus changes as he tells Peter that discipleship is about self-denial, self-sacrifice and taking up our cross.

Let’s look at Peter more closely. We can see much more about relationship as we see what Matthew shares with us. Remember, Peter is all of us. In him we can see our own relationships with God and the choices we make. Today we can talk about Peter as both rock and stumbling block. Do you remember what happened last week? Peter answers Jesus’ question. “Who do you say I am?” Peter gets it right, he answers, and “You are the Christ!” What is revealed to us is the identity of Jesus. He goes on to say that Peter is the rock, and the Church will be built upon him!

Now, here we are this week. Jesus goes on to explain what his mission is all about. He has turned his face towards Jerusalem. He says that he will go to confront the religious and political leaders of Israel. Jesus adds that he will suffer, die and then rise again. It’s here that Peter misunderstands what is being said. He pulls Jesus aside and says that this isn’t what he expects, that Jesus must be wrong. Peter has an image of Jesus restoring Israel to its former glory. What Jesus is saying is not what Peter wants to hear.

It’s here that Jesus rebukes Peter. Imagine one of your heroes or favorite people telling you that you are wrong! Jesus is faced with Peter’s temptation to change God’s mission. He reacts with a stunning force that shocks us! “Get behind me!” Poor Peter has been named the stumbling block ... a far cry from last week’s rock. Then Jesus goes on to explain what it means to follow him. This is about relationship and choices.

Stop and think about how often Peter appears in the Gospels and the choices he makes. Jesus calls him to follow and Peter admits he’s not worthy. Another time, Peter sees Jesus coming across the water towards his boat. He gets out of the boat to walk on water ... and sinks! We know Peter will deny Jesus during the trial. In the midst of all this, sometimes Peter is right, often wrong. The choices he makes are mixed. The one thing that doesn’t change is his relationship with Jesus. He is still loved, he is still a follower.

I really like Peter because I think he is us. Just like Peter, sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we get it wrong. Too often we can be our own worst enemy, especially when we let our personal vision clash with God’s vision. In that battle, we know who wins ... God! What’s going on here? The temptation to do it our way is one of the biggest problems between humans and God. We deny God too often and insist on saying, “This isn’t what I want.”

At a recent Miami meeting of Miami religious administrators (William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource”) an interesting thing was overheard about choices and relationships. The Rabbi

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said, “Thus saith the Lord!” The priest said, “The Church has always said ...” And a layperson said, “Now it seems to me ...” what we see here is that temptation to alter the call to fit God’s vision into our vision. We want to do it our way, no “my” way!

What is taking place here is the description of what the relationship will be like. To be a Christian is to be a follower. In Jesus and Peter’s time, a rabbi and disciple had a particular relationship. The disciples were followers. There was no questioning the teacher. Peter falls victim to the human temptation to want to change God’s call into something that is more compatible with what we want!

Now we Jesus describing the nature of Christian discipleship for Peter ... and for us. Jesus says follow him. He insists that he will lead the way, not us. Next Jesus speaks about self-denial. It’s not about us; it’s not about our will. Finally, he talks about taking up the cross; being part of sacrificial love ... and those others come first. What was the crucifixion of Jesus all about? Did he do it for himself, or did he die for us?

Paul expands what it means to be a follower of Jesus in Romans. He talks about practicing mutual love and affection. Paul talks about being patient, especially in suffering and to pray. Paul talks about our need to contribute to the needs of others. We are to bless enemies, live peaceably, not to seek retribution and revenge, and to overcome evil with good. What is given to us today is a new way of being in relationship with God. To follow Jesus doesn’t mean that we get to pick and choose what we will or will not do.

Another shocker for us, as we try to understand what it means to be a Christian, is that we don’t come to church to get our own needs met but to respond to god. The Church is not about being a consumer. The Church is not about guaranteeing us success. It’s not “my way or the highway.” God says that the divine ways are not our ways. We have to learn to stop thinking that the world’s ways are God’s way. Just like Peter, we fail to understand what God is all about.

It’s time for us to readjust our thinking. The Church is not about profit, or bottom lines, or goals and objectives, or production, or discovering ourselves. Discipleship is not a life centered on materialism, power, self-satisfaction or what we want. The Church is called to be a place concerned about meeting the needs of others, of losing ourselves, of following Jesus, and of taking up the cross. Discipleship is about self-denial, self-sacrifice and bearing our cross.

We have to find a way to avoid being the stumbling block and become the rock. Like Peter, God doesn’t give up on us. Like Peter, sometimes we get it wrong, and sometimes we get it right. But in all of the choices we make, we are still in relationship with god. We are people called to follow, and to make a difference in the lives of others. I’ll tell you something, that when we do this ... we will find our needs met.

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I've been thinking a lot this summer about our call. Each of us is called to follow Christ and serve others. What might that look like for us now? Early in the summer, I got a call from the Diocese to help a church in Camden start a free medical clinic. I sent out a notice and expected 3 or 4 people to come talk about this. Imagine my surprise when 20 people showed up! There were looks of good ideas and all summer I have received e-mails with other ideas. Do we need signs to help affirm our calling? For me, it was the number of people who showed. Another was an e-mail from friends across the street, a group of nurses with the Presbyterian Church, who want to be included in our efforts. We're on the right track.

Another thing that has come to mind is helping Mt. Pisgah finish their building program. More than two years ago a fire destroyed their church home. Imagine what that would be like for us. Now they are having problems finishing the project. The thought that came to me was that we should rally the faith communities in this town and get the job done. We have enough people and ability that we could do it. I e-mailed some of the local clergy and shared a proposal to invite the Haddonfield Council of Churches to get behind this. I got a sign later that day I was on the right track. A parishioner met me on the sidewalk and shared how he was thinking about a "habitat for humanity" effort to help Mt. Pisgah get back into their church. Again, we're on the right track.

There are other calls that are coming mind to me. One is to invite other people, especially those society considers outcasts, to worship here. It is our call to help others find and encounter a loving God. Still other is to be a place of worship that offers people many different opportunities to gather for a service. That has led me to make plans to offer a Sunday night service beginning next month. All of these are ways of following Jesus Christ and contributing to the needs of others. We all have choices to make, and God invites us into relationship.

I would like to hear from you what you hear God calling us to be and do. How will we make a difference in our world in the name of Jesus Christ? What can we do as Christ's disciples? It's a new year, and we're back to our fall schedules. Share with each other and me how we will answer God's call and be followers! Amen.