

The Peter Principle: Setting the Bar Rather Low

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John 18:25f; 21:9f

You gotta love Peter! With a role model like this, if Jesus gave Peter the keys to the church, you and I ought to get the deed! Good ole' Peter, solid as a rock: quicksilver, impetuous, enthusiastic, hair-triggered – willing to jump into any lake and ask questions later. Surely Jesus had Peter in mind when he said that “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” And I am sure Elvis was thinking of Peter when he wrote “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

Peter was the one who rebuked Jesus when he told them that God had sent him into the world to suffer and die on the cross for the sins of the world. “Say it isn't so Jesus!” He was the one who jumped out of the boat to walk to Jesus on the Sea of Galilee and started to sink when he realized that he was walking on water. He was also the one who emphatically declared that he would follow Jesus to the death at the last supper. A few hours later, the same Peter vehemently denied that he even knew Jesus! No wonder Jesus said, “beware of people who speak well of you.”

I

Poor Peter: the object of so much ridicule through the centuries – and so richly deserved! We probably like Peter so much because we can identify with him. He is a mirror into human aspirations and weaknesses. No one gets up in the morning and says to herself, “How can I fail today and disappoint all my friends and colleagues.” We set out to do our best, but and we get distracted or diverted by other priorities and needs. We don't intend to be late or forget an appointment. For most of us, we are so busy taking care of business that we run out of time and energy and wisdom and blow it.

Then we get older and brain cells start dying off and the old grey matter ain't what she used to be. Raise your hands if you have trouble remembering everything you're supposed to do each day? Raise your hands if you have trouble remembering everything you're supposed to do each day? -- See what I mean?

One of the reasons we are reluctant to be hard on Peter is that we see ourselves in him. I certainly can. We have a standing joke at our house about leftovers. Elaine will frequently say at dinner that she is going to give the left-over meat to the dogs, and I, ever the Scottish thriftmeister, will say, “Save it; I will have it for lunch tomorrow.” And of course I never do; I

always forget. I am confident that when Peter protested Jesus' statement that they would all desert him in his hour of need, he meant every word of it. I believe he was sincere when he said that he would follow Jesus even to his death. I don't believe that he had any reservations or second thoughts. It was a genuine, spontaneous display of affection and loyalty on Peter's part. The problem was, he hadn't been tested yet. It is easy to declare fidelity and commitment at the altar or in the safety and comfort of the parlor. But when we are threatened with danger or tempted by beauty and seduction, the horse becomes a chameleon and changes color in a skinny minute.

And so when the soldiers had arrested Jesus and hauled him off to court, Peter began to feel the noose tighten around his own neck and his true colors began to show. Frightened, his instinct for survival overrode his desire and promise to do the right thing. In other words, he folded. Perhaps that is why he got so angry when the woman stated for the third time that she was sure that she had seen him with Jesus earlier in the day. "The man doth protest too much!"

II

If you have ever had any doubts that the Christian faith is based on *grace* and grace alone, then our second lesson ought to cure you of that. Four or five days after Peter had lied about his relationship to Jesus, Jesus gives him an opportunity to absolve himself of his guilt and shame. Peter and some of the disciples had returned home and gone fishing on the Sea of Galilee. But the text tells us that they had caught nothing. Then the risen Jesus shows up on the shore and asks them for food. How ironic that the one who had fed thousands was now asking his disciples for food; but they were unable to feed him because their luck at fishing was about as good as mine.

When Jesus suggested that they pull up their net and cast it on the other side of the boat, they caught such a large haul that they had trouble getting it into the boat. In fact, John tells us that they caught 153 fish! Now, don't you find it exasperating that the Gospel writers tell us nothing about Jesus' life from age 12 to age 30 and yet John tells us that the disciples caught 153 fish!? I don't get that. Some commentators believe that the large number is mentioned to show the superabundance of blessings that Jesus gives his disciples. Augustine saw a mathematical formula in this number. If you add all the integers between the numbers 1 and 17 you come up with 153, which Augustine believed was a number that evoked completeness.¹ I don't know

about that, but it does seem that wherever Jesus shows up there is always more than enough to go around, with a lot left over.

Once again, impetuous Peter was so glad to see Jesus that he jumped into the sea and started swimming to shore. When he got there Jesus had a fire going with fish and bread cooking. This reminds me of my mother: no matter when I visit her she always has some kind of food to offer me. It is in her DNA. So once again Jesus feeds them. After breakfast, Jesus gets to the main item on the menu and asks Peter if he loves him more than the rest of the disciples. Peter is taken aback by such a question and says, “Yes, Lord, you *know* that I love you.” How many times have we answered when our beloved asks us, do you love me? “Of course I do!” Not exactly the answer they were looking for.

So Jesus asks again, “Peter, do you love me?” And Peter gives the same answer, “Yes, Lord, you *know* that I love you.” You can almost feel the tension in the air, as Peter resents being put on the spot. So, when Jesus asks him a third time, Peter explodes and says, “Lord, you *know* everything; you know that I love you.” Do you see what’s going on here? Peter knows that Jesus knows that he loves him; in fact Jesus knows that Peter knows that he knows that Peter loves him. But that isn’t what Jesus is doing. He knows that Peter is still wallowing in his guilt for denying Jesus three times.

So, Jesus is giving Peter three opportunities to be absolved of the guilt by declaring three times that he does in fact love Jesus. Perhaps, down deep, Peter understands what is going on, and is unable to deal with the gravity of the situation. But Jesus is doing this not to scold Peter or to punish him, but because he loves Peter he is helping Peter to purge himself of the evil that has gripped his soul. Jesus, the Good Physician, is performing major surgery on Peter’s soul, and it takes him three incisions to remove the whole tumor.

And after each indirect declaration Peter makes, Jesus says “feed my sheep.” In other words, if you love me you will serve those who follow me. The way the Christian life works is that we can’t love Jesus if we don’t love one another, try as we may. Have you noticed that? What Jesus is doing here is calling Peter to discipleship a second time. Peter has fallen off the wagon with his three denials, and this is such a serious betrayal that Jesus has Peter renew his discipleship vows – three times, a punishment that fit the crime. Jesus is being very compassionate and gracious here.

How many times have we let things we have done to harm others simmer in our hearts because we have not had an opportunity to be forgiven by that person or by God because we have not confessed it or sought reconciliation? Life is too short to walk around with those kinds of burdens. That's why God gives us endless opportunities to confess our sins and to be liberated from those burdens. Thanks be to God! Can I get an *Amen* to that?

III

Before we are finished, let me say a word to the *men* in the house. What's up with our difficulty with saying those three precious words? I know that this is *guy* thing, but why? Why can't we look into the eyes of the ones who mean the most to us and say without equivocation "I love you?" Most of you know that I have been blessed to have one of the best fathers in the world for 59 years. He has always been an attentive, supportive, generous, loving father to me, and I would wager everything I own that he loves me. But apparently he would rather have all his fingernails pulled out with pliers than look me in the face and say "I love you."

And the same can be said of me. My love for my father is wider than the ocean, and yet I have trouble looking him in the eye and saying those precious words. I can write them in a card or a letter and I can refer to my love for him *indirectly* like Peter, ("Dad, you know how much I love you, don't you?"). But to look him in the eye and say, "I love you" is very difficult for both of us. Maybe that is what Peter was struggling with on the beach. Maybe that is why instead of saying, "I love you" he said, "You *know* that I love you."

No one wants to have to ask "do you love me?" We want it to come voluntarily -- at their initiative. A famous preacher, Ernest Campbell, once said that if he had to ask his wife if he had preached a good sermon on the way into the driveway after worship he knew that he had laid an egg in the pulpit. We long to hear those three little words, but not as a result of an interrogation but freely given with genuine feeling. Reynolds Price once wrote that every human being longs to believe in a gracious God who loves us and knows us by name.

I don't know about you, but when I survey the blessings in my life, my family, my friends, my sisters and brothers in Christ, especially you, I hear God saying to me everyday, "David, I love you -- now, feed my sheep; share that love with others. Don't hoard it; it is not your exclusive property; it is meant to be shared with others. That is the only way it will bring you joy." I am reading a wonderful book right now that we are going to be using in our stewardship season this fall. It is entitled *Enough*, and its' subtitle is *Discovering Happiness*

through Simplicity and Generosity. Its message is very simple: most of the ways we pursue happiness are dead ends. We think that money, fame, prestige, strength and beauty will bring our souls contentment, and most of us take a lifetime to figure out that this is not true. According to Jesus, only one thing will bring us the joy and peace we all seek: Love – the unconditional love of God for us and sharing that love with others.

In the end, we all want to love and be loved by the people who matter the most to us including our Maker. But so much in our world diverts us from that path. Thank God that Jesus loved Peter enough to call him twice – and the same goes for us. Let us pray.

¹ Gail O'Day, New Interpreters' Bible, vol. IX , Abingdon, , 1995, pp. 856-858.

