

MAY 26, 2024

Marion weekly update

May 19 sermon - 'Heroes & Villains: Peter' Acts 2:1-14, Acts 10:11-28

This week we begin a new series for the summer called Heroes and Villains. We'll be looking at different figures throughout scripture to see what inspiration we can glean from their stories. Our first one today is the heavy hitter Peter. Peter has a good bit written about him so we're going to have to dial it in a bit. In my opinion we can break Peter's story down into two phases, disciple and apostle.

Peter the disciple is known for engaging his mouth before engaging his brain. He's the Peter that was dense and didn't get Jesus' message. In fairness the other disciples didn't really either, he was just more assertive about it. He's the one who exclaimed that he wouldn't allow Jesus to die to which Jesus responded "get behind me Satan". His story is told every Good Friday. Proving he didn't get Jesus' intentions he cut off the servant's ear in the garden. He denies Jesus three times.

Yet this is also the Peter who was the only one to have faith enough to jump over the rail of the boat and take a few steps on the water when Jesus was strolling across a stormy sea. He's the one who was restored after the resurrection as Jesus famously asked him three times "do you love me? Feed my sheep". He's also the Peter that Jesus pointed to and said "upon this rock I'll build my church." This rock is Peter the apostle.

There are two aspects of Peter I want us to consider this morning.

First is his example on Pentecost. Most Christians I come across don't realize that Pentecost isn't necessarily an original Christian celebration. We hijacked it because of the Holy Spirit, but it was around long before that day. Pentecost is also known as Shavuot, which is a Jewish celebration. It commemorates Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai and is one of three pilgrimage holidays in the Jewish tradition. This explains the scene that plays out in Acts when the Holy Spirit comes.

Gathered outside where Peter and the others were that day were Jews from all over the place. Why were they there? They'd made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this celebration. It explains why the Holy Spirit empowered them to speak in a multitude of languages so that the message could be heard by all that were present. Keep in mind as well that this message wasn't going out to Gentiles. It was to the Jews as at this moment they understood that the Messiah was intended for the Jews and the Jews alone.

Something we don't often consider is the impact this one moment could have had on spreading the message of Christ in the Jewish world. As a pilgrimage festival, those that were present would return to wherever they came from. The ones who believed the message would carry that message back with them. So while they likely wouldn't grasp the fullness of what it meant to believe as they'd be going home before receiving further instruction, they would in essence be the first unwitting missionaries carrying this new faith through the Roman Empire to their own people.

Who was leading the charge to preach this gospel? Peter. "Upon this rock". While it's widely understood that James became the main lead in the Jerusalem church, at the outset Peter is the one boldly stepping out and proclaiming the message. When the Spirit came on Peter he was gifted with the ability to speak powerfully and persuasively. This was how the Spirit worked in Peter. He also healed. But there's a reason in the hymn "There is a Balm in Gilead" there is a line that says "if you can't preach like Peter and you can't pray like Paul."

Here is our first inspiration from Peter. Whatever gifts the Holy Spirit gives to any of us, use them intentionally and passionately to serve Christ and to build His church. We aren't all gifted the same. That's the whole image that the body is made up of many different parts, all with equally significant purpose. When Peter was called he answered. When he was gifted he used those gifts with everything he had to serve. The result is that the church was built. People believed and their lives were transformed.

Peter had no idea how that first act of service and obedience as an apostle would impact those who listened to him preach. He had no idea, maybe never found out, and we will never know ourselves, how

far his message spread as people returned to their homes. How many fledgling groups of believers sprang up and were ready to receive more as the apostles went on their missionary journeys? Peter didn't have any of the on the mind. He simply did as he was called and gifted to do and the Lord handled the rest.

Whatever your gift is, whatever my gift is, we have no idea how even the seemingly smallest act of service and obedience to our calling might impact a life, a community, even the world. Like Peter none of that is up to us. What is up to us is to do as he did. Receive God's grace and gifting. Then use those graces and gifts to spread the Kingdom of God in our world.

Our second example from Peter's story comes as he convinces his fellow Jews that the gospel of Christ is not for the Jews alone. It's also for the Gentiles. We associate Paul with the apostle to the Gentiles, but it is Peter's vision and willingness to go against the sensibilities of all the other Jews that invited the Gentiles into the faith in the first place.

The scene is Peter hungry and in a trance on a rooftop where he sees a vision. A sheet filled with unclean animals is lowered before him and he's told to eat. He refuses because as an observant Jew he was raised to not touch anything unclean. The response? "What I call clean, don't call unclean". The message, the Gentiles are just as clean as the Jews, and are welcome into the community of believers.

This is no easy sell. The Gentiles had mistreated the Jews over and over again. Sometimes it was to the point that bands of Jews would rise up in revolt. They would be crushed, and likely knew they would be. Still, enough is enough sometimes. Why would they even consider welcoming these filthy idolators? Why would they invite into their company potential relatives of soldiers or magistrates who could rat them out? No. Keep this Messiah thing in the Jewish people.

Peter was not deterred. God gave him a message. Everyone is welcome. God wants all people no matter who they are, where they are from, what they are doing or what they've done. Bring them to Christ and let the Spirit work in their heart just as the Spirit works in our own.

This is inspiration. When God says someone is in no one gets to say they are out. When God says someone is welcome no one gets to exclude them. When God breaks the walls that divide us and says that all are desired and called no one gets to build those walls back up.

There is no one outside of God's desire for relationship and redemption. There is no one to whom grace is not offered. And there is no one better than any other in the sight of God. Romans says "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God". So whatever excuses people make to say someone isn't welcome or worthy are hollow because the ones making the excuses are just as sinful as the ones they point the finger at.

Accept the gifts God has placed within us. Use them in service to God, inviting people to Christ, and allowing the Spirit to do Its work. Follow our calling as passionately and fully as the apostle Peter did his own. Remember that no one is too far afield that God doesn't desire them. Remember that each of us has our own sin that could be pointed out and used divisively, so we don't do that to another. In using our gifts we welcome all knowing that the transforming power is in Christ, not us. As we follow our call, we become more like Jesus and in serving others we hope that they become more like Him as well.

BIBLE STUDY—1 Samuel 20 (last Bible Study lesson until September)

The friendship between David and Saul's son Jonathan is regarded as one of the most beautiful friendships in scripture. Chapter 20 solidifies this notion, even if there is some squirrely stuff in here. Perhaps the oddest is David and Jonathan giving Saul the benefit of the doubt yet again. Saul has tried to kill David several times already and made it known to Jonathan that he wants David gone. What more do they need? Perhaps Jonathan doesn't want to believe just how far out of bounds his father has gone? Perhaps David doesn't want to believe that Saul is truly so bloodthirsty, jealous, and unstable? Whatever the situation, this conversation between David and Jonathan is deep with promise and loyalty.

Jonathan immediately shows his devotion to his friend. They have an honest conversation about Saul's intention. Jonathan pledges that despite David's hopeless state he will not suffer his friend to die, even at his own father's hand. They hatch upon a plan together to sort out Saul's intentions. David mentions that their relationship is more than comradeship, it is a covenant between them before the LORD. If he is going to die he'd rather get it over with and be killed by a friend than by Saul.

The story is that David has gone to worship with his family. Jonathan gave him permission. Depending on Saul's response depends on how Jonathan will fire the signaling arrows. If it's safe he'll fire to the near side of a rock, if unsafe to the far side signaling David should flee. What converses in the midst of this is significant beyond the moment. It's significant in the future of all of Israel.

Jonathan enters into a covenant with David that he will reliably report to him for his safety. What he asks in return is that David will show kindness to his (Jonathan's) family in the future. Jonathan is communicating that he knows David will one day be king. He also calls on God to hold David's enemies accountable. This is no light request as he knows his own father is counted among David's enemies. He is projecting that David will reign and he knows what happens too often to family of the prior monarch in these times. The family is killed to prevent any uprisings or coup attempts. Jonathan wants their friendship to overcome such brutality. David agrees, and later we will see that he honors this with Jonathan's son.

At the dinner where Jonathan will sort out Saul's intent the first day Saul assumes David must be unclean and that's why he isn't present. The second he sees right through their scheme. Saul goes into a rage because his son has sided with his perceived enemy. He's so angry he even goes to the equivalent of a "yo mama" joke. He also reveals his continued lack of regard for God's word. God has already told him his family has been cut off from the throne. Jonathan we've seen already is not only aware of this but is also fine with it. He's ready for David to be king. Not so Saul. He's still clinging to some false hope that he can keep his family in power. Thus he asks for David to be brought before him to be killed.

Saul is so incensed that he tries to kill Jonathan, his own son, the same way he tried to kill David. He hurled a spear at him. Jonathan is angered and he is grieved. This is significant. Imagine Jonathan's internal struggle. His father, whom he loves, hates David, whom he also loves. He in that moment has to come to very real grips with just how unjust and mad his father has become. His father shamefully seeks the head of an innocent man, and a man of whom Jonathan personally knows the quality.

As David prepares to depart he and Jonathan say goodbye. It is a heartbreaking image of two friends deeply connected on a level scarcely recognized by people. David shows his dedication to Jonathan for his loyalty and love by bowing to him. The future king is bowing to the son of the present murderous king. The image is one of love, humility, and covenant. Their parting words speak back to the early part of the chapter. "The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever." Their families are forever entwined.

If we can find even one relationship in our lives as true and deep as this friendship we are indeed lucky. Holding others at arm's length for whatever reason when there is an honest and true connection that has no falsehood and only goodness is foolish. There will always be circumstances in life getting in the way of following our purpose and calling before God. Like Jonathan to David, people are placed in our lives to help us navigate these circumstances as we pursue God. They are gifts of the best sort. The best way we honor God is by embracing them and just as they are a gift to us being a similar gift to them.