

Peter: The First among Equals

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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The second sermon in the Lenten series *Old Disciples and New.*

Text: Luke 5:8

“But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down on his knees, saying, ‘*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.*’”

Out of the clear blue this week an old high school friend Walt Caldwell got my email address and sent me a message. It all had to do with his finding one of my relatives on *Facebook* and, well, the connection gets made. I do not think Walt and I have seen one another since, maybe, 1970. The gap must be thirty-five years. Walt is the fellow I have told you about before. In high school Walt came to church with me one Sunday morning. Now Walt was from a good Irish Catholic family and when his father the retired Army colonel heard his son had been praying with the left-handed Protestants, he cold-cocked his son right in the mouth. Even though Vatican 2 had met, the word had not fully filtered down to places like Bonham, Texas, yet.

Well, a lot has happened to us both since then. Walt began his message recalling some of the things we did in high school. He has a selective memory and didn't mention the story I just told you. He must have married and had a few children, but I am not even sure about that. This week's message was brief and requested more information but one question came at the end. Walt always sought answers in his own around-the-back-fence sort of way. Having read that I became a divine, he couldn't resist asking me the following questions. They are amazingly apt for our second sermon in this series on the disciples, particularly this one on Simon Peter.

So David, the questions I have for you are: Do you feel more spiritually developed as a result of your work and study? Or would your awareness of Godly matters come anyway, without your labors? Is spiritual growth something you can labor away at and get paid in full? Sorta like the prodigal son story. Is it more productive to be like the older son who plodded through, doing as he should, or is it just the gift to a "lottery winner" or the prodigal son, who just happens to be under the Bo tree at the right time?

Note that little allusion to Buddhism at the end there. Does faith (and discipleship) just happen to you or does working to achieve it have anything to do with it?

Twenty years ago I would have said working to achieve it has nothing to do with the call, believing, or discipleship. “*Faith without works!*” the great cry of Luther and Calvin. But I will

temper that a little with a caveat: *creation is part of the call*, too. I see this in the story I read to you of Peter's call in Luke 5. Actually it was only the end of his call, for Peter had been looking at Jesus for a while, quietly observing and listening and taking it all in. It is entirely likely the fisherman was in the synagogue at Capernaum the Sabbath before and watched the exorcism of the troubled man with a demon.¹ Peter's wife invited the visiting rabbi to their house for the Shabbat dinner and while there, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law of her fever.² The next day Jesus healed more folks. That day Jesus was teaching crowds by the lake—Capernaum is by the great lake we call the Sea of Galilee. Peter and his friends had been on the lake fishing all night. They had caught nothing and were gathering up their nets to go home to sleep. I imagine Peter casually watched and overheard the rabbi on the beach. You know what happened, it was in Ms Reynolds' sermon two weeks ago. Jesus asked Peter if he could stand in his boat so that the crowd on the shore could hear and see him better. Peter nodded an assent without commitment. After the lesson was over, he told Peter to put out his boat and fish over there. "We've been at it all night, Rabbi, and you know the fish aren't biting," Peter replied. But when he tried, he caught more fish than he had caught in a month. Peter may not have acted like he was listening, but he got it, at that moment. Peter fell on his knees and said "*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!*"³ He learned something about himself at the same time he learned something about the faith. Self knowledge comes before or along with God knowledge.⁴ If you believe God made each of us and knows us, then God's call is not spur-of-the-moment, random. Nor, as Walt said, does it visit someone "just happens to be under the Bo tree at the right time." Creation is part of the call, too. We learn something we did not know about ourselves as Peter's moment of confession revealed, something God knew about us all along because he created us. That was Peter's call. When Jesus lifted him off his knees, Peter *followed* Jesus. That verb means Peter became a disciple.

There are many Peter stories in the Gospels. But the other one I read today is Peter's confession and his dressing down in Matthew. Peter was the first disciple to say out loud the truth about Jesus. He confessed Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus said that he would establish his church on Peter and his faith.⁵ After the great moment Peter messed up his score when he challenged Jesus about the cross. "Lord, this will never happen to you!"⁶ Having said he would build a church on Peter and his faith, now Jesus called Peter Satan, telling him (and the other disciples) Peter was not on the side of God but of men. A lesser man would have never recovered from this rebuke. But Peter, you see, already knew he was just a man, a fallible one at that. In his call, he had already confessed his unworthiness. A part of Peter's fascination with Jesus was that Jesus still asked him to follow. It is not enough just to figure out who God is.

¹ Luke 4:33-37.

² Luke 4:38-39.

³ Luke 5:8.

⁴ Calvin's classic definition of faith: 'a two-fold knowledge—knowledge of God and knowledge of self.'

⁵ Matthew 16:18.

⁶ Matthew 16:22.

Life is complicated and understanding life involves accepting a cross, his and yours. So Peter took the rebuke and learned something— again—about himself and God.

There is no more famous story of Peter than his three denials the night Jesus was betrayed.⁷ At the last supper Jesus predicted it would happen:

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers [and sisters].” And [Peter] said to [Jesus], “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death,” He said, “I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you three times deny you know me.”⁸

The phrasing is intriguing: First, that Satan wanted Peter but he had to go through Jesus to get him. And, second, assuming Peter’s faith survived his moment of weakness, he will come back and strengthen his fellow disciples. How many of us could have come back to Jesus after such a failure as happened that night? Not only come back but come back when all your fellow Christians knew about your weakness? Again, it takes a person who is fully aware of himself—all the strengths but also all the failures. Jesus knew Peter and in each of these events, Peter seems to have known himself. But he knew more than self, he also knew the forgiving love of God: the one who called him in that over-laden fishing boat years before, the one who lifted him from his knees and invited him to be a disciple. “*Peter, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.*” After the episode of weakness, Peter got up off his knees and followed Jesus *again*. Peter learned more about himself and more about God that night. All along, however, Jesus knew Peter and that was part of his reason for calling Peter to be his disciple.

The last story I want to remind you of is last week’s Transfiguration.⁹ There Peter was one of the three whom Jesus took up the mountain with him. He was the spokesman for the others in that story, and not, I think, because he talked too much or was impulsive. This story reveals again that Peter was, rather, the first of the disciples and the leader of the twelve. “Peter, you are the rock, and on this rock I will build my church.” Though the church has quibbled over what it meant for Peter to be first, he became the leader of the church, a fact acknowledged by Paul and all the other early leaders of the church. In Peter’s mind he was the first among equals. But his leadership came from three bedrock facts of his life: (1) He was called by Jesus to be a disciple. (2) He knew himself and kept learning that even though he had weaknesses, God worked in his weaknesses. And (3) that Christ forgave him, prayed for him, and believed in him.

So we come back to my old friend’s questions.

⁷ Luke 22:54-62.

⁸ Luke 22:31-34.

⁹ Luke 9:28-36.

Do you feel more spiritually developed as a result of your work and study? Or would your awareness of Godly matters come anyway, without your labors? Is spiritual growth something you can labor away at and get paid in full? Sorta like the prodigal son story. Is it more productive to be like the older son who plodded through, doing as he should, or is it just the gift to a "lottery winner" or the prodigal son, who just happens to be under the Bo tree at the right time?

No, my life as a later day disciple of Jesus was not the result of a lottery, of one who just happened to be at the right place at the right time. As with Peter, it depended on a specific call, a call from one who knew me better than I knew myself and still wanted me to be his disciple. Once that call engaged me and I agreed to follow, various spiritual practices, my education and life experiences all worked together to make me who I am today. As to the prodigal son and older brother, their father loved them both, but they were different. He knew that—after all he was their father. Both had to ‘come to themselves’¹⁰ and that is the moment of self knowledge. All disciples of Jesus have such a moment. In Peter’s case it was on the deck of his fishing boat, and later, when he was rebuked by Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi, and still later the night in the High Priest’s courtyard. But it is more than a moment of self enlightenment. It is also a moment of recognition that Jesus loves you anyway and has a plan for your life. We know if you do not know Jesus you will never be a disciple. But it is equally true that if you do not know yourself you will never be one either. There are those like Peter who find themselves when they find Jesus. At that point discipleship begins.

According to most of the Gospels and St. Paul,¹¹ one of the first people Jesus appeared to in his resurrection was Peter. No one knows what he said to his disciple, but we know what Peter did, how he ‘turned again’ and became the rock to strengthen his brothers and sisters and us. Can you be—do you want to be—that kind of disciple?

End

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¹⁰ The prodigal ‘came to himself’ after his failures and resolved to turn back to his home and father and elder brother. See Luke 15:17.

¹¹ 1Corinthians 15:5.