

We All Have a Place in the Kingdom

Today's Gospel presents us with one of the most pivotal moments in Jesus's ministry. Alone with the disciples, Jesus asks them what people are saying about him. They reply that people think he's a prophet, like John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. But when Jesus then asks, "and who do *you* say that I am," Simon Peter jumps right in with "you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praises Peter to the skies, promising to make him the rock on which Jesus will build his church. There's a pun here. The Greek name that Jesus gives Peter, *Petros* (Πέτρος), literally means "rock" or "boulder," so Jesus is promising to make Peter the foundation, or maybe the cornerstone, of the church that will bear his name. Scholars disagree about the extent to which Jesus anticipated the rise of Christianity. Many theologians think that Jesus intended to reform corruption in the Temple, not to establish a whole new faith. But this is definitely Peter's shining moment. For once, the former fisherman's tendency to leap without looking earns unqualified praise from his beloved teacher, because he jumped to the right conclusion while the other eleven disciples held back.

Just imagine how the others must feel. To put this episode in context, Jesus has just refused – again – to perform a miracle on command for the religious authorities. He warns the disciples to beware the "yeast" of the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teachings. The disciples misunderstand at first, and Jesus gets a little testy when he corrects them. By "yeast," Jesus means the little doubts that the religious authorities drop into the minds of their listeners, doubts that could eat away the disciples' faith in Jesus if allowed to grow unchallenged. Without wanting to read too much into the text, I wonder whether the eleven other disciples are a little embarrassed by their initial confusion, and their embarrassment makes them reluctant to volunteer their thoughts about who Jesus is, lest they get it wrong again. Peter, the least cautious

among them, never seems to suffer embarrassment – at least not until the crowing of a rooster forces him to confront his own cowardice and boastful ways. But that comes later. For now, Peter is the hero of the moment, and the other disciples may wish that, for once, they had stepped out as boldly as Peter always does.

Personally, I can sympathize with the silent disciples. Our highly competitive and individualistic American culture teaches us from the cradle that our purpose in life is to excel. It's not enough to be good – you have to be great. And if you're hardworking and tenacious enough, society promises that you'll triumph over whatever obstacles life puts in your way. If you don't succeed on the first try, that just means you didn't try hard enough, so try, try again. Respectfully, that's rubbish. No matter how talented, bold, hardworking, and dedicated you are, there will always be someone who's more talented, bold, hardworking, and dedicated than you. The world isn't always fair, and our society is structured to give people who already enjoy extra privilege an advantage in getting still more. The race doesn't always go to the swiftest, virtue doesn't always defeat evil, and good guys sometimes finish last. Fortune may favor the brave, but circumstances don't always break your way no matter how courageous and deserving you are. And if you've just stepped in it with someone you admire, keeping your mouth shut until you figure out what you're supposed to say next isn't cowardice, it's sensible caution.

The traditional interpretation of this passage praises Peter for his boldness and suggests that the other disciples should have said what he did. I don't want to disrespect Peter – as you know, I have a huge soft spot for him. But it's unfair to criticize the other disciples for holding back. They would have been taught all of their lives to expect the Messiah to be a military leader who would deliver Israel from their Roman oppressors by force of arms. No matter how special they knew Jesus to be, he was a healer and a teacher, not a gladiator. There had never been

anyone quite like him, and there never would be again, because Jesus is unique. The prophecies hadn't predicted that the Son of God would come to earth in the form of a Galilean peasant. It's no wonder the disciples were a little confused.

There's a practical problem that might have arisen if the disciples had all piped up in unison when Jesus asked them who they thought he was. Jesus only needed one Peter to be the rock on which his church would be founded. Trying to establish a church founded on eleven different "rocks" – we're not including Judas – would have been a nightmare whenever all those different personalities tried to assert themselves. As it was, Peter and Jesus's brother, James, who joined the Christian movement after Jesus's ascension, had considerable difficulty bringing the church into being, in part because of their ongoing disagreements with an upstart former Pharisee who changed his name from Saul to Paul after falling off his donkey on the road to Damascus. My personal theory is that Peter and James sent Paul off to evangelize the Gentiles in the fervent hope that they would never have to deal with him again. That Paul succeeded so brilliantly and became such a powerful voice in shaping the Christian faith just goes to show that you never can tell what the Holy Spirit is up to, or whom she'll use to carry God's divine agenda forward.

That former Pharisee's letter to the Romans makes an important point. As members of the body of Christ, we each have a role to play in the church because we each have different gifts. Just as a body wouldn't function well with multiple heads but no torso, or dozens of hands but no feet, the church needs all of its members to share their God-given talents. Some of the roles people take on are higher profile than others, and we can make the mistake of thinking that those roles are more important. They're not. They're just different, and those of us who happen to have leading roles shouldn't think too highly of ourselves. The prophets and ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders and compassionate are all needed for the church to thrive. If you notice

that something – an outreach ministry or learning opportunity, for example – seems to be missing from the life of the church, you just might be the Holy Spirit’s first choice to make it happen.

We can’t get too comfortable with the notion that we all have our own roles to play because that idea has too often been used to justify keeping historically disadvantaged people “in their place.” Jesus was never about maintaining an unjust *status quo*, and I don’t think he’d want us to be, either. But I do think he’d want us to recognize that it takes everyone, with all of our gifts and quirks and occasional shortcomings, to help the Holy Spirit usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. If anyone refuses to play their part because they’re jealous that someone else seems to be getting more attention and praise, if anyone is too afraid of failing to even try to contribute, and especially if anyone is denied the opportunity to share their talents because someone else considers them to be inferior, the Kingdom will be incomplete. That can’t be God’s plan.

National Geographic recently published an article questioning whether the twelve disciples actually existed. Historians are confident that Peter did. So did Thomas, the former doubter who evangelized a sizeable congregation in India before he was martyred. Judas, or someone like him, might well have betrayed Jesus as the Gospels report. But we know so little about the other disciples that some historians think they were fiction. I disagree. The earliest histories report that Jesus surrounded himself with twelve disciples, and there’s no contemporaneous evidence to the contrary. But perhaps we don’t need to know which of the disciples were cheerful, which were sulky or sad, which ones could sing or dance or whistle, which ones sometimes shirked their responsibilities and which ones always went the extra mile. We know that God thought Peter was the right disciple to grow into the first Pope, and that Jesus thought he needed all twelve of the disciples, even Judas, to accomplish his mission. Whatever else they were, every last one of the disciples was essential. So is every last one of us. Amen.