

Unlikely Heroes

Today's Scriptures allow us to witness the moments when Jesus calls two saints who are widely recognized as foundational pillars of the church: Peter and Paul. John's Gospel gives us Peter's final encounter with the risen Christ, a meeting that echoes so many earlier moments in Jesus's ministry – his calling of Peter and Andrew to be fishers of people, his feeding of the multitudes with fish and bread, Peter's impetuous jump out of a storm-tossed boat to get to Jesus as he walked on water, and especially Peter's shameful denial of Jesus after his arrest. The charcoal fire in this passage harks back to the charcoal fire that burned in the Temple courtyard on that terrible night, and the three questions Jesus asks him allow Peter to make amends for his three denials. It's a powerful, healing moment that restores Peter so that he can once again become the rock on which Jesus will build his church.

Our reading from the Book of Acts gives us the similarly powerful moment when Jesus appears in a vision to a hot-headed Pharisee named Saul. Their encounter occurs sometime after the disciples have begun spreading the Gospel throughout the Hebrew community. Saul first appears in Acts at the martyrdom of Stephen, a saintly man chosen by the disciples to serve the practical needs of the Christian community while they evangelized. Stephen is falsely accused of heresy – just as Jesus was – and is stoned to death by the Sanhedrin. Saul not only approves of Stephen's execution, he becomes something of a zealot, determined to eradicate what he sees as the heresy of the Christian movement. Saul "ravag[ed] the church, by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." Saul is bound for Damascus to arrest more of Jesus's followers and drag them back to Jerusalem to stand trial when Jesus essentially smacks him upside the head with a divine two-by-four, knocking Saul to the ground with a blast of light that leaves him blind and unable to speak for days.

Examining these two passages side by side, we can see what they have in common. We know more about Peter than we do about Saul at this point but they're both unlikely heroes. Neither is an obvious candidate to lead the emerging church, much less for canonization. Saul is an ardent enemy of the church, so obsessed with obliterating the Gospel that the Lord asks Saul why he is persecuting not Jesus's followers, but Jesus himself. Peter is the denier, the disciple whose self-preservation instinct obliterated his loyalty when it mattered most. He's probably drowning in guilt. We heard last week that Peter was present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples after his Resurrection and, in all likelihood, when Jesus came back to speak with Thomas. Whatever conversation Peter and Jesus had then, though, it doesn't seem to have relieved Peter's shame. Saul and Peter both need Jesus to speak directly with them, and Jesus is uncharacteristically blunt when he does. There's no euphemistic "he who wishes to follow me" language in either of these passages. Jesus orders Saul to get up, go to the city and await further instructions. And he's not much gentler with Peter. After telling Peter three times to tend and feed his sheep and predicting that Peter, too, will eventually be crucified, Jesus simply says, "Follow me." It's a command, not a request, and there's no question who's in charge.

Tellingly, Jesus addresses both of these men not by the names the whole world would someday know, but by the names they were given before entering his service. Jesus calls his disciple "Simon son of John," and never once refers to Saul as "Paul." Some Bible scholars think Saul already had the Greek name Paulus due to his father's Roman citizenship, so that his switch from Saul to Paul was just an accommodation for his Gentile audiences. That misses an important point. In Scripture, new names often signify a major change in the role a person will play in the divine plan. Just as Abram became Abraham when God chose him to be the father of nations, Simon became Peter when Jesus chose him to be the foundation of his church, and Saul

became Paul as he grew into his ministry to the Gentiles. At this point, though, neither Saul nor Simon has yet become the man whom God intended him to be.

What they also have in common is that their personality traits which we might dismiss as character flaws were essential to their respective missions. The recklessness that drove Peter to jump out of boats into stormy waters gave him the courage to stand up to the Temple and Roman authorities and lead the infant church even when his own life was threatened. Paul's intensity and stubbornness made him a tireless advocate for Christ and a powerful preacher. Neither of them was perfect. When guided by their devotion to Christ, however, each of them became the perfect person to fill his foundational role in bringing Christianity to birth.

This is all good news for those of us who want to follow Jesus. The church doesn't need founders anymore. It doesn't need defenders, either, despite what you might hear to the contrary. Christianity is well established around the world and, while there are still places where Christians risk martyrdom, the institutional church has historically been the oppressor far more often than it has been the oppressed. The church needs disciples who understand that following Jesus demands more than wearing a plastic "What Would Jesus Do" bracelet that will someday end up in a landfill. Bible scholar Karoline M. Lewis argues that, in this passage, Jesus is instructing Peter to follow him into life-changing discipleship and to become the Good Shepherd himself instead of looking to Jesus to fill that role. Peter isn't supposed to pretend to be God, but he and the church are supposed to embody God's goodness after Jesus has ascended. Jesus's instructions extend to us, too. The world needs good shepherds, faithful people who will tend and feed God's children even when the powers and principalities condemn empathy and deny help to those most in need. And while we don't know exactly what Jesus told Paul to do, Lewis writes that God also relies on us "to witness in the world that God loves, with the entirety of our

beings,” just as Paul did. We, too, may be unlikely heroes, and that’s okay. Odds are, no one here will be martyred. The work we’re called to won’t often be glamorous, exciting or historic. It might not even be noticed. Following Jesus means living wholeheartedly into our faith, though, and that can require us to do and become more than we ever anticipated.

Thanks be to God, Jesus is risen, not gone. In the first portion of today’s Gospel, we see the only begotten Son of God cooking breakfast for his friends over a campfire on the beach. Jesus isn’t absent from the great cathedrals and palaces of power. However, the risen Christ remains very much present in the humble, everyday world where ordinary people have to labor at mundane tasks to survive and where, no matter how hard or long we work, the nets we cast out into the world sometimes come up empty. But just as he turned not glasses but gallons of water into wine in Cana, just as he transformed a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish into a feast for thousands of hungry people, Jesus shows us in this passage that, even after his Ascension, he is still the God of abundant miracles, the God who fills fishing nets to bursting, the God who offers grace upon grace to those who choose to follow him with all their hearts. It was true for Peter and the disciples, it was true for Paul, and it’s still true for us today.

Jesus’s sheep need a lot of feeding and tending. Our Lord asks much of us, just as he asked much of Peter and Paul, just as he gave so much of himself. When our strength or hope fails, when our nets come up empty, he’ll fill them this way. Jesus blesses his disciples with lives that matter, with opportunities to change things for the better, with the chance to see how, when we give him our hearts, our shortcomings can become the very strengths most needed to serve a hurting world. Jesus leads us to become our best selves, the people he always knew we could be if we would only follow him. There can be no greater blessing. Amen.