

The Second Chance at Discipleship

Peter and Paul, Apostles
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 87:1-3, 5-7;
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; John 21:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is starting out for me like one of those special dinners you throw for someone you've invited to your home. You know the way it goes – you have everything planned but somehow just as it's time to serve, everything starts unraveling and coming apart. That seems to be what's happening to me!

But we're talking this morning about a wonderful banquet, a banquet without which none of us – none of us – can survive. It's a banquet of story and word. It's a banquet of wine and bread. And it's a banquet that draws us in through the washing, cleansing, holy waters of baptism. And so when we celebrate today, we can not only celebrate with the wonders of food, but we can celebrate as we remember the lives of two apostles without whose efforts we might not be enjoying the service we enjoy today. And as we recall their discipleship, we have an opportunity to reflect upon our own.

You see, discipleship isn't something you do at some particular part of the day or week; remember, discipleship is that word that holds together all of what we do within the week and leads to the question: Who is it that our lives and living reflect? And so today we remember St. Peter and St. Paul and as we recall their discipleship, we are given the opportunity to reflect upon our own.

Peter, Cephas, the rock upon which Christ built His church. And Paul, the great missionary who established congregations around the rim of the Mediterranean and some of whose letters we are still privileged to read today. Yet, in the end, in the end, successful though they were, Peter and Paul, faithful disciples, paid a terrible price. Peter was crucified, upside down we are told, for he was convinced he was not fit to be crucified in the same position as His Lord. And Paul, according to tradition, was beheaded in Rome, because it was not permissible to crucify Roman citizens.

Paul. Saul of Tarsus, a citizen of Rome. Paul was his Roman name. Paul was raised as a faithful Jew and became a dedicated and faithful Pharisee. So often those dedicated and faithful men are cast as the "bad guys" in the story of the Christian faith. But that is not accurate, and it's certainly not fair. They were faithful Jews, very faithful Jews, who promoted purity of living and fidelity to the Law of Moses. According to Acts, Paul went on to receive training as a rabbi in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. His knowledge of the Law and of rabbinic methods of interpreting it is evident in all the letters he's left for us. Like most rabbis, he supported himself with a manual trade, tent making we're told, probably learned from his father. It is clear that he never met Jesus personally while in Jerusalem, if indeed he was ever there before Jesus was crucified. However, he learned enough about Jesus and his followers to regard Christians and the Christian movement as a disastrous threat to the Pharisaic Judaism that he embraced so eagerly. Not

surprisingly, therefore, he first appears on the scene of history as a persecutor of Christians, routing them out and killing them. He was on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus when he encountered Jesus in a most dramatic way.

Blinded and thrown to the ground, he was taken into the city of Damascus where in hiding, he remained blind for three days while a faithful disciple, a Damascan disciple, Ananias, had a dream. In the dream Christ commissioned Ananias to seek out Paul and bring Paul words of healing and forgiveness. Ananias wasn't at all happy to be undertaking the mission he was given and, in his vision, remonstrated and argued with Christ. Did the Lord not understand who it was he was being sent to rescue? But having vented himself and told Jesus how wrong he was, he obediently left to carry out the task he was given. He found Paul, who regained his sight, and immediately was baptized. And you know, more or less, the rest of the story.

The first thing to note for our own faithful living, that is our own discipleship, is that no one, absolutely no one, no matter who they are or what they have done, is beyond the range of a compassionate and forgiving loving God. Absolutely no one. And His love carries no conditions. To hear this, in itself, is for us a difficult obedience. For we can quickly call to mind those we believe who are completely and without question unforgivable. And then we recall such thoughts might be our thoughts; they are certainly not the thoughts of Christ, or of those who faithfully live in His name.

Then we are reminded that, like Paul's, our baptism immediately admits us to the ranks of the disciples. You know, disciples aren't something that are sort of made off a production line; discipleship is received in baptism and then discipleship is learned as we proceed through our lives. And that calls for a certain response – to be faithful disciples, to live astoundingly enough, in a freedom, in an enormous freedom given by God yet at the same time, curbing the exercise of that God-given freedom for the sake of those whose faith is not yet as mature or as strong as our own. And in all of this we grow in our understanding that God's central act in Jesus of Nazareth, His death and resurrection, by that the work is completed for the salvation of humanity. A work completed on the first Easter, freely given, and left to each individual to accept or reject, but there is nothing they can do to add to what has already been done.

Peter's story is not nearly as dramatic as Paul's. But for me at least, I find it much more comforting. Peter a fisherman, and I brought up in a small fisher-folk village in New Zealand. It all began while Peter was following John the Baptist, baptized by him presumably, and one day, walking along John pointed to Jesus of Nazareth and said to Peter, "Behold the Lamb of God." Peter left John to follow Jesus. And the rest, as they say, is history.

So Peter became one of the disciples whose enthusiasm even led him to try to step out of the boat, fully dressed, to walk on the water. But no sooner had he stepped off the boat than he immediately saw the precarious nature of his position and the hopeless, human impossibility of it all. Later, when Jesus announced to His disciples that He was to be arrested and suffer and die, Peter immediately and angrily protested to the point where Jesus turned around and addressed him as Satan – "Get behind me Satan!"

Later still, Peter huddled in a courtyard outside the building in which his master Jesus was on trial and denied his relationship with Him three times, only to be crushed and broken at the crow

of the cock at dawn. And yet through all this, Jesus loved Peter, so much, that on that man, Christ built the church.

The first thing to note for our own faithful living, that is for our discipleship, is that like Peter, we too have denied and betrayed our Lord, haven't we? How many are the times we find ourselves conducting OUR mission? Doing things OUR way? Putting everything on the basis of OUR understanding as to how the mission and ministry of the church should run? Only to discover, as Peter did, that mission and ministry often flies in the face of all reason because the power of Christ is hidden in the midst of human weakness and not as a crown to human success. How many times do we reserve for ourselves the money, the time, and the service that we ought to give to our Lord? And we, like Peter, step boldly out of the church into the waters of our culture and time, to find ourselves captivated, body, mind, and soul, so that we hardly realize we are in danger of drowning, only to find ourselves at the last minute, rescued by the unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace of God and find ourselves given yet another chance.

What was it that Winston Churchill said when someone asked him what it was that prepared him to lead Great Britain against Nazi Germany? Churchill said it was the time he had to repeat a grade school class. "You mean you failed a year in grade school?" he was asked. "I never failed anything in my life," said Churchill, "I was given a second opportunity to get it right."

Nor do we fail in our discipleship, though God knows how many second opportunities He has given us and has yet to give. So we find ourselves here this morning to receive what Peter and Paul and so many others gave their lives to preserve for us. The vital food of Word and Sacrament so essential to the nature and nurture our faith, to equip us for our task of living it as disciples of Christ, to do His will – not as we ought, but, surely, as we are able. That's the least we can do, is it not? So we come to this table, to receive such a meager meal, a tiny wafer dipped of wine. And yet in that meal, like Peter with John the Baptist, and Paul on the road to Damascus, and Ananias in a dream, we actually make contact with the tangible presence of our forgiveness, of our salvation, and of our calling, it is a real encounter with Christ. May this morning's encounter change us, as it changed Peter and Paul, so that transformed, nurtured, and commissioned, we might take the real food of salvation from this place out there, to a starving and famished world, whom God would call us to feed.

Amen.