

### **The (broken) primacy of Peter**

On the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias, the Franciscans recently (in 1933) built a small and lovely church to commemorate the scene described in John 21. The altar is built on top of a large, bare rock – the rock on which it is thought Jesus served the bread and fish in this story. Just outside the door of the church and across a bit of pebbly beach, you can stand in the lapping waves of the Sea. And it doesn't take much imagination at all to envision a charcoal fire and a fishing boat not far from the shore. Just up the path from the church is a breathtaking sculpture. Jesus is standing up straight with his right arm extended in blessing over Peter's head. Peter is kneeling in front of Jesus, leaning back and looking up at him with his left arm extended upward, receiving the blessing. This place is called "The Church of the Primacy of Peter". Primacy means "the state or condition of being first or foremost".

Peter. On his knees. Leaning back. Prone. Vulnerable. Reaching for Jesus. Willard Swartley, Professor Emeritus at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN writes, "Peter is a rich character in the New Testament." Rich, indeed! Is there any character in the New Testament more full of hubris than Peter? Hubris means: "overbearing pride or presumption, arrogance". Peter is brash and bold, making grand, sweeping statements and claims. Peter – called Simon by his family and then re-named by Jesus – proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah! Only he thought that meant Jesus would be a military ruler. When Jesus explains that he will necessarily be rejected by the religious leaders and killed, Peter has the nerve to rebuke his master. Jesus, in turn, snaps back, "Get behind me, Satan." Peter is among the inner circle of three on the Mount as Jesus is Transfigured. The narrator tells us that it was Peter's impertinent suggestion to build three booths because "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified". Some might suggest that when you're terrified and you don't know what to say, maybe you shouldn't say anything. Not Peter. It was Peter who objected to Jesus washing his feet – and then insisting that Jesus wash him completely! It was Peter who demonstrated his "intent to be like Jesus" by stepping out of the boat onto the water and immediately going down. It was Peter who pledged his life to Jesus and then fell asleep at Gethsemane, leaving Jesus to suffer alone. Peter. Who stood at the charcoal fire and denied even knowing Jesus at his trial. Peter had felt the "whippety, whappity, fwip, fwap, WHAM" of his failure and, like Verdi, had "landed in a crooked sprawl" and croaked, "Help".

But it was this same, resilient Peter who ran right *in* to the tomb when Mary reported that Jesus' body was gone. This story tells us that Peter (and the others) experienced the presence of the resurrected Jesus on this familiar Sea. The Sea that Jesus had calmed. The Sea on whose shores Peter had heard Jesus teach and witnessed Jesus heal and provide bread and fish for the multitudes. In this beautiful story we see the same impetuous Peter, full of hubris and rich in character jump out of the boat to try to get to Jesus on the shore more quickly! We see the same Simon Peter proclaim his love for Jesus three times.

The difference this time is that Peter's basic personality traits, while still intact, have been tempered by humility and multiplied by grace. This is the good news, folks! God created Simon to be impetuous and brash and full of hubris and rich in character – those are all the things that would allow him to be re-named Peter, Petra, the Rock. Just like Verdi, Simon Peter had to *be* himself, to use his gifts and experience the falling, the brokenness, the healing and the restoration. That IS God's grace and mercy.

The good news is that God's grace and mercy are abundant! Jesus shows up and invites Peter and the others to try again even after they've fished all night and failed. And in their failure they find abundance. 153 fish! Jesus calls them for a breakfast that he has already provided, but he invites them to bring some of what they've caught too. As Peter stands, again, around a charcoal fire he is not only forgiven, he's invited to continue Jesus' work. Abundant grace.

If Jesus can build his church on the likes of Simon Peter, what do you imagine he can do with each of us?

Look around you! Each person brings their own "rich character" that God has created. Look within you! Be attentive to the amazing gifts God has given you – and know that you were created with exactly what God intends and needs you to be in this world. This is not about what your job is. Peter was a fisherman. And it's not about who you're related to or what kind of ethnic food you enjoy. This is about what makes you, YOU – your passions, your abilities, your quirks and foibles. The good news is that each of us can choose to love and follow Jesus, using our God-given abilities to feed his lambs and tend his sheep and feed his sheep.

Jesus does not call us to perfection; he calls us to resurrection – to his abundant newness and grace. He calls us to BE fully who we've been created to be and to do it from a position of humility, in front of Jesus, reaching up to receive his blessing. He calls us to grow up in him and not be content to fasten our own belt and go wherever we want, but to stretch out our hands in vulnerability, to allow the belt to be fastened around us and to be led – sometimes where we do not wish to go. He calls us to expect him to appear, to be surprised by the bounty he provides and the amazing ways he invites us to participate in his work in the world. Thanks be to God!

I invite you to join in the words of confessing and reconciling that are printed in your bulletin. Let's stand as we read. And you may also want to turn to #81 in the SJ book – we'll sing it several times and I encourage you to sing it as a prayer, from memory as you can.

Resources:

*Believers Church Bible Commentary, John.* Willard M. Swartley

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4583> "Resurrection is Abundance" by Karoline Lewis.

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craaft.aspx?post=2522> "Commissioned Yet Again" by David Lose.

<http://www.jpost.com/Travel/Around-Israel/Sites-and-Insights-The-Church-of-the-Primacy-of-St-Peter>