

Ordinary, Fallible, and Called

Peter is a fascinating character. In the book of Acts we discover he's a great preacher. He's a mediator, able to bring together people of divergent opinions. He helps to expand Christianity beyond the Jewish community. He's larger than life. However, there are also occasions when Peter is timid, impetuous, and lacking in faith. He is a guy with whom we can identify. From Peter we learn that simple, fallible people in ordinary vocations can be called by God to do extraordinary things.

It seems likely that Peter is uneducated. Before he meets Jesus, he lives by the Sea of Galilee, owns his own boat, and makes his living as a fisherman. He leads a humble life, but still gives up a great deal when he leaves his fishing boat behind and follows Jesus.

What an amazing journey that turns out to be. He receives personal instruction from Jesus as well as hearing Jesus' speeches to the crowds and watching Jesus do miraculous things. He and his old fishing buddies, James and John, form Jesus' inner circle. They witness events that not even the rest of the disciples get to see. So it's surprising, maybe even shocking, to learn that after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter decides to go back to his life of fishing.

Why is he back at his old trade? Perhaps this is one indication of his fallibility. The gospel writers don't attempt to clean up Peter's image. We're quite aware of his previous mistakes. He fails at walking on water toward Jesus because of his doubt. Immediately after receiving praise for declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, Peter is rebuked by Jesus for not accepting what Jesus tells him about what will happen next. During the last few days before the crucifixion, Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet, cuts off a man's ear, and falls asleep while Jesus is praying during the hours before his arrest. Peter's most egregious error, of course, is his denial of Jesus. Within 24 hours of vowing to go with Jesus to prison and death, Peter denies even knowing him. To make matters worse, he repeats this denial two more times. Afterwards, when Peter looks up and sees Jesus, he is devastated.

I wonder if this devastation is part of the reason Peter returns to fishing. He would have been present on the two occasions Jesus appears to the disciples soon after his resurrection. But, we don't know any of the details concerning Peter during these interactions. Does Peter's guilt prevent him from talking to Jesus or looking him in the eye? Perhaps Peter returns to fishing for a time of retreat and renewal. By returning to the place where he first met Jesus he might be able to remember his call – the time he accepted the invitation from Jesus to follow him and become a fisher of men and women.

The story told in John 21 is quite similar to the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, including Peter, as told in Luke 5. In the story we read today, when Jesus asks the question, "Have you caught any fish?" the disciples appear to take him quite literally. I wonder, though, if they experience a bit of *déjà vu* and begin to think back on their years with Jesus. As soon as they follow the stranger's instructions and are overwhelmed with their catch, John knows that it's not a stranger standing on the beach. It's Jesus! Peter doesn't wait for the boat. He jumps into the water and hurries to shore. His excitement at seeing the risen Christ and remembering his call to follow seem to overcome any guilt and shame he feels.

The breakfast that follows reminds Peter and his companions of some of the most meaningful moments they shared during Jesus' ministry.¹ Perhaps during the meal Jesus helps them think about the lessons they can learn from what just happened. Fishing on one's own is fruitless, especially when

¹ The next four paragraphs include ideas from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 242 and Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 167-168.

fishing for men and women. But fishing as Jesus directs yields bountiful results. Perhaps Jesus reminds them of his earlier words, words recorded in John 15:5. *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.* Perhaps Jesus tells them that the miraculous catch of fish is a sign, a vision of the success their mission as his followers will have, expanding to people and places beyond what they can imagine.

After breakfast, Jesus focuses his attention on Peter. He asks Peter the same question – in slightly different forms – three times: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Three times Peter replies, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Each time Jesus responds with a request, “Take care of my flock.” Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to profess his love the same number of times as Peter denied their relationship after Jesus’ arrest. Even though Peter feels some hurt during this exchange, I imagine he also feels forgiveness and acceptance. His relationship with Jesus is restored.

Peter is also recommissioned for his task during this encounter with Jesus. Jesus tells Peter to look after his flock. Peter knows Jesus is talking about his human followers, not about sheep and lambs. Jesus asks him to nurture them with teaching and pastoral oversight. Jesus also lets Peter know he will have the opportunity in his old age to live up to the boast he had made earlier, to follow Jesus to prison and to death.

This story shows us a Lord of second chances, who patiently restores the fallen and provides new opportunities for fruitful service and living up to their own best intentions. This story shows us a God who is persistent in calling ordinary, fallible people to carry out God’s mission in the world.

Most of you are familiar with my life journey. I began my career as a teacher and then worked in a Christian bookstore for many years. During that time, some people began encouraging me to attend seminary. I knew I enjoyed leading worship, teaching, leading Bible studies, and even preaching, but I couldn’t visualize myself as a pastor. I continued to experience internal and external nudges toward seminary until I finally relented. What I first perceived as a call to study, I soon named as a call to ministry and eventually as a call to be the pastor of Salina Mennonite Church.

During my time here, I’ve gained knowledge and experience while also making mistakes. After ten years, I thought I thought I had this pastoring thing figured out. And then the pandemic hit. My familiar ways of doing ministry were turned upside down. I’ve fumbled my way through and done some things well, but I’ve also had some missteps along the way. I’m sure there are times you’ve wondered “why is she doing this” or “why isn’t she doing that?” I’m not saying this to garner sympathy nor to elicit compliments, but to let you know that I realize I’m ordinary, fallible, and called. If there’s something you need from me, don’t hesitate to talk to me about it. I’ll try to do my best to do what I can with the resources I have.

I also want to let you know that if you’ve been experiencing uncertainty, doubt, or guilt about things you’ve done or haven’t done during these past six weeks, you’re not alone. As we learn from Peter’s story, God is loving and merciful, willing to extend grace when we fall short. I pray that you will accept God’s love and forgiveness. May we as a church family, offer grace to each other and extend God’s love to our community.

God is able to take whatever unique combination of skills, abilities, and limitations each of us has and do something more with who we are and who we can become than we are able to do on our own. God calls simple, fallible people in ordinary vocations to do extraordinary things. God did it with Peter. God is doing it with me. God is doing it with you. God is doing it with us as a congregation. May each of us be encouraged by these facts as we open ourselves to new ways of living in these unusual circumstances and as we continue to accept Christ’s invitation to follow him.

Prayer: *Merciful God, like Peter, you call us to follow you. Like Peter, it is our desire to do no matter what it might cost us. Like Peter, we make mistakes, sometimes even to point of denying we know you. Like Peter, you invite us again, and again, and again, to follow. Thank you. Amen.*