

Luke 18:28-30
Luke 22:24-33
Matthew 16:13-20

IN PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

Last Sunday we talked about Peter's first conversion, Phase One of the Christian pilgrimage. Peter may not be an exact model or illustration of this phase for everybody, but his pattern is classic, and close enough to be more than instructive for most of us.

Phase Two is not really a second conversion – that comes next Sunday. But there is a definite second phase that follows the first conversion in most of the stories of the saints. We called the first phase FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. We might call the second phase FROM DISCIPLE TO CHIEF APOSTLE. To be sure, the way our world thinks and measures, we cannot all become the chief apostle. It is nevertheless true that we move from the great initial enthusiasm of first conversion into a time of hard work, responsibility, and serious effort to be useful and effective for our Lord. The second phase is not a change of direction, but a development of the direction chosen.

Peter worked hard and advanced in the calling which he had heard and answered. He moved into a position of leadership and responsibility. The weight of it all became heavier, and his conviction and confidence and effectiveness grew steadily. This period goes from early in Jesus' ministry until just shortly before the crucifixion. Peter became First Vice President of the New Kingdom Movement. His prestige increased beyond anything he had known in his old fisherman's life. The crowds, the excitement, the popularity of Jesus' ministry was making Peter famous too. The burden and pressure were increasing to match, as it always does. We imagine, or at least I do, that Peter was essentially an optimistic, happy-go-lucky, freewheeling sort of person. In Phase Two, we sense the increasing weight that goes with Peter's new role. He starts *trying too hard*; he starts *needing to be right*; he shows more and more *defensiveness* toward that which threatens or disagrees with Jesus or what Jesus is trying to do. None of us have ever had such problems, of course, but putting humans into any position of responsibility or caring raises instant tension: can we live up to it, show ourselves worthy, maintain the level of performance implied and expected?

Peter identifies himself with Jesus and what Jesus is doing. It has become his whole existence and identity. He is it, and it is him. The success of the Movement around Jesus has become Peter's whole life. We can feel him becoming more and more "driven" to make it come out the way he wants it to. Peter's decision to follow and his reason for being – his life and soul and worth and value – are all locked up in the outcome and eventual success of Jesus' earthly ministry. This is not true, as you know, for Jesus Himself. But it is the epitome and essence of Phase Two.

It is probably not necessary to convince you of what you already know, but since I am making such a strong point of it, perhaps I should first demonstrate that this is true of Peter's story.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, Peter is the outstanding member of the twelve. Among the twelve, Peter is always named first. (Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13) He is first to be called to follow Jesus, and first to be named in the list of the twelve. To think of the apostles is to think first of Peter. If I had asked any of you to name the twelve apostles as you entered the sanctuary this morning, you would all have named Peter first, and most of you would not even remember the names of half of the others.

Peter takes the initiative, whether foolhardy or commendable. In most of the conversations between Jesus and His disciples, Peter is the one who speaks for the others. We keep coming across phrases like, "*Simon and those who were with him*" and "*Peter and those who were with him.*" (Mark 1:36; Luke 8:45; Luke 9:32) When an inner circle of the twelve is mentioned, Peter is always included and always named first. As in: The miraculous catch of fish; the raising of Jairus' daughter; the transfiguration; the scenario in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is Peter and John who are sent to prepare the Passover meal for what we call Maundy Thursday.

Peter is the one appointed to rally the disciples after Jesus' arrest. (Luke 22:31-32) According to Luke (and Paul), Jesus appeared first to Peter after the resurrection. (Luke 24:34; I Corinthians 15:5) Peter is the one charged with ministering to all the followers after the resurrection: "*Feed my sheep.*" (John 21:15-19)

Peter is the first one to recognize and declare Jesus' true identity. We shall return to that scene in a minute. Peter is the rock

upon which Christ will build His church. It is twice recorded that Jesus Himself stopped attempts on the part of James and John to take over Peter's place as chief apostle. (Mark 10:35-37; Matthew 20:20-21)

It seems quite clear, then, that Peter ranked first among the disciples of Jesus. Jesus knew it. Peter knew it. The disciples knew it. The early church knew it. You knew it. And now I know it.

Phase Two is a lot of hard work. Sometimes we forget that the Gospels only recount a few of the most memorable moments of Jesus' ministry. What do you think Peter is doing for most of those three years? "From now on, you will be catching people," Jesus had told him. The crowds keep getting bigger, the opposition keeps mounting, and you know Peter is right in the middle of it. He is chief apostle because he does not back away from it. And maybe we don't know all the details, but we know enough about life to have some understanding of how it must have been. People who could not reach or persuade Jesus would try to get to Peter. And you go to bed every night thinking of all the things you did not get done, how you might have responded to this or that situation, or what you might have said differently to this or that person. And why did your temper flare again, when you promised yourself to keep it calm? And when Jesus looked at you that time in the middle of the mayhem – was that dismay or disapproval, or was He maybe just saying, "How are you doing with all this?" Oh well, tomorrow is another day ... and here it comes now.

Like any genuine convert, Peter has a great desire to prove his worth to Jesus, to make Jesus glad that He has called Peter. After the first initial enthusiasm, Peter wants very much to succeed. Do not judge it as good or bad, it is just Phase Two. It does some good, it does some harm – it seems to be a phase we all have to pass through.

Perhaps we can best highlight the glory and pathos of Phase Two by going to Peter's finest hour within this phase. It is the highest moment of the lowest level of the Christian pilgrimage. It is Peter's confession of faith: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

They are on holiday, in Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Herman, way north of Herod's territory and their own area of ministry. Jesus has asked a crucial question. Peter, as usual, is the

only one with courage enough to dare an answer. We expect every novice Christian today to know the answer by heart. But the first time around was a different story. Jesus had never put it into words Himself. He usually referred to Himself as “Son of Man” – enigmatic on purpose. It was not Jesus’ way to push His identity onto others. He went about His business, and waited for people to discern the truth and come to their own conclusions. But now ... on retreat ... in a quiet, unhurried moment as they talk together, Jesus asks His closest friends: How are you doing with all this? Is any of it registering? Are you okay with it? Who am I?

The answer on Peter’s inside goes against everything he has been taught on the outside. It goes against everything he had grown up believing. *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.... You shall make no image of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth beneath,”* for I am holy – different from anything you can know or imagine. In reverence, no good Jew would even speak the holy name – though in truth it was not a name, but only a hint toward identity that God had given to Moses. But who then *is* this, who floods the nets with fish, and calms storms, and heals children, and reaches into your mind and fills your heart with hope and purpose like you never imagined possible before?

Peter must kick over his entire heritage to make the reply that wells up from within. It is shocking. It is blasphemy, and he could get killed for it. Eventually, he *will* get killed for it. If he is wrong, Jesus Himself will be aghast, and scandalized. Even brash, headstrong Peter must have swallowed hard before he could utter this thing that had never before been said on the face of the earth.

Better if we do not say it too lightly today either. Better if we say it with our hearts in our throats, and our temples pounding, like Peter had to. Only, the problem is, Peter *does* know who Jesus is! Oh, the exact wording is not the issue. But Peter has bet his life on Jesus – bet it on Jesus even more than he consciously knows. And there is more to life than Peter knows, and that is bet on Jesus too. Nevertheless, Peter has bet his life on Jesus and he is glad he has done it, and so he is willing to say so: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”**

Jesus is delighted. Peter has moved from disciple to apostle – from learner to message-bearer. Peter knows, and he will bear

witness to what he knows. “*On this rock I will build my church.*” Jesus is delighted. It is exceedingly important to notice that Jesus is not outraged.

In our time, as in every time, there is much offense in Peter’s statement. We are told, on the one hand, that we should not voice such things because it sounds so exclusive and superior to the sincere beliefs of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Buddhists, and so forth. On the other hand, if the apostles had never learned to claim their faith, we would never have heard of Jesus. On yet another hand, Jesus Himself instructs His disciples in this very same passage not to tell anyone else His true identity. That might give us at least some concern to be discerning about to whom, when, and in what circumstances we give voice to our faith. On still another hand, we are part of a tradition that for two thousand years now would rather *die* than deny or keep quiet about Jesus.

Before we can finish contemplating it, a strange thing happens. In the very wake of the great confession, almost before the sounds of the words die out, a great rift is revealed between what Peter wants and what Jesus wants. It will plague them both mightily until Phase Two comes to an end. I suppose it’s nobody’s fault, really. Jesus sees what He sees – and He sees much too deeply and much too far into the future for Peter to follow Him easily. Jesus cannot be expected to betray His vision and purpose. Peter cannot be expected to comprehend it, except on its most superficial levels. But as a result of the confession itself, and the fact that the rest of the twelve share Peter’s conviction once it has been voiced, Jesus is eager to move to a deeper level of understanding with His closest friends. It seems like this ought to be possible now that they are clear about His identity. I read it straight from the record: “*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [They did not hear it all, did they?] And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’*” (Matthew 16:21-22)

I do not want to sidetrack you, but it never ceases to amaze and dismay us that only a few minutes after Peter has declared Jesus to be the High Prince of the Entire Universe ... he also decides that he, Peter, is able and worthy to teach and instruct this same Jesus. How

that makes me shudder within. But that is the epitome of Phase Two at its worst: telling Jesus what to do, and how to do it; trying to take over, to stay in control; wanting to run things our own way. Oh yes, there is something terribly familiar about Peter.

And what is revealed is that Peter's confession of faith – no matter how appropriate, no matter how high it sounds – Peter's confession is only as big as his Phase Two perspective. When Peter says "You are the Christ," what he means is: "You are the Christ according to my definition of what that means." He means: "You are the Christ who will lead us into prosperity, fame, and success." At this point, Peter cannot fathom any other concept of the role and function of the Messiah. Jesus' strange remarks threaten all of Peter's assumptions about his own future and the meaning of his faith. Jesus is trying to serve God alone, and Peter is trying to ride Jesus' coattails into security, success, and victory in this world and in this life. In a nutshell, that is Phase Two Christianity.

Does that make your hair stand on end just a little bit? It does mine. Peter knows the right answers. But he does not know the meaning or significance of his right answers. He is not kidding about giving his loyalty or his life in the hard days ahead. He knows that the Kingdom is coming, and that, in the process of coming, there will be quite a battle. He has even felt it gathering all around him for months now. He has no intention of shirking his responsibilities. He is not even discounting the possibility that he himself may be a casualty in the coming conflict. Things happen. Peter knows that. But for Messiah Himself to be killed – unthinkable ... preposterous! On top of that, there is Peter's own personal love and affection for Jesus. "Somebody is going to try to kill you? Not on my watch, Lord – not while I'm around."

But there is a dimension to Jesus – and to the Kingdom, and to the battle – that Peter in no way comprehends. Not yet. It is no wonder! The Kingdom is not of this world, and neither is Jesus, and neither is the battle. Strangest of all, neither is Peter. And neither are you.

So Peter has come a long way. His life is devoted and committed. He knows the right answers. Only, he means them in the context of this world only, and therefore the answers – for all their enthusiasm and faith and loyalty – are entirely inadequate. Jesus

puts it a bit stronger: “*Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.*”

That must have cut Peter to the quick. It sure does when He says it to me! Peter felt the pain of the rebuke, but could not fathom its depth or understand where it was coming from. It stared at him from out on the edge of his consciousness like some dark burden of unknown weight and magnitude. It belonged to him, but he did not know how to lift it yet. He would not know what it was about until the day of the rooster. And so this terrible remark was not the end of Phase Two, but it was the beginning of the end of Phase Two.

What about our similarity to Peter? We do not always make first-chair, like Peter did, but we try to be effective. The most conscientious efforts for earthly success come after, and out of, the first conversion. It really is not selfishness alone that makes us want to succeed. We want to succeed for the Lord. We want to do our part. We want the Lord to be proud of us, and we want Him to know how much we love Him and want to serve Him. What else can we do but try to succeed at something that seems worthwhile? And usually we do find a measure of success in one place or another, in one way or another. Maybe not enough, but enough to comfort ourselves that our faith is sincere. What then?

Well, look at the pattern: Conversion ... change ... growth ... moving up ... responsibilities and leadership. What comes next? Crisis!

At first we don't believe the crisis is directly ours. It was a mistake, or it was somebody else's fault, or we just happened to be there. But the crisis is about the company or the church or the organization or the family or whatever it is we are trying to succeed with. So we think it is merely a time to give our all, to go for broke, to save the situation. (We will fight in the valleys, we will fight in the hills; we will never shirk our duty; we will never give in.) And mostly we think the situation will be saved, with God's help. It will turn out okay and we will be sitting pretty again – vindicated, secure, honored, maybe even loved. That was how it looked to Peter, until Phase Two was shattered, and he found himself in Phase Three. Phase Two is always *shattered*. It never ends in any other way.

Last week we left Peter as a happy new convert, filled with an initial enthusiasm – optimistic, success-oriented, still completely immersed in the things of this world. For the most part, that has not changed in Phase Two. Only, Peter knows a lot more. He has experience and know-how, a lot more knowledge, a clearer awareness of who Jesus really is. And he is a lot more effective and a lot more important to Jesus' ministry by now. We must not minimize that, or think that Jesus is ungrateful for it. Peter has become first among the twelve apostles, and his big concern is for the success of Jesus' New Movement.

But there is one more thing now. Peter has that terrible phrase gnawing at his insides: "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. You are not on the side of God, but of men.*" That is a very hard thing indeed, to say to the chief apostle.

Do you ever wonder about "the hindrance to Jesus" of Phase Two Christianity in our own day? It is enough to make one weep. It made Peter weep, when he finally understood. He wept until his heart and his soul and his will were broken.

Please do not get the impression that I am looking down on Peter, or thinking he was slow-witted or anything of the sort. If Peter had not tried like he did, he never could have become the right arm and the rock that Jesus needed. Phase Two is an essential part of the Pilgrim's Way, and there does not seem to be any way for any of us to skip it or duck it. Peter was doing everything humanly possible. We can surely admire and respect him for that. Only, Peter got himself mixed up with a Savior who plays for keeps, in a world that really needs saving. When that happens, everything humanly possible ... is not nearly enough.

PRAYER

O God, we do not want to chase the wind, or to be empty, or to be unprofitable children under the sun. We do not want to spend our lives in aimless wandering after values that do not matter, building castles that have no meaning in the tides of time.

Yet our sense of the eternal is very hazy, and we do not always notice very much of it around us. Those things we do not will or want, that is where we find ourselves – spending our lives on the nonsense things of space and time.

How mysterious You are, O God – holding the mystery of eternal purpose; having the mystery of power uncorrupted; being the mystery of love beyond need; shaping the mystery of truth that never leads astray; creating the mystery of beauty that throbs and changes, but never fades.

O God, if we cannot find or become or contribute to that which truly IS – grant at least that we may recognize it, and learn to worship YOU. In our Lord's name, we pray. Amen.