

Sept 22      The Rest of the Story

Acts 4:1-12

Today we end our look at Peter, the flawed but faithful disciple. We begin at Pentecost. Peter, like the rest of the disciples, is now back in Jerusalem but hiding behind locked doors because they are afraid that they might be arrested. He has been given the commission to be the shepherd of the flock but fear still seems to dominate his life. Then the Holy Spirit comes, resting on him and the others, like tongues of fire, burning away all doubt and fear. It was through the power of the Holy Spirit that Peter becomes the rock Jesus predicted he could be. On that day Peter, who had been so afraid that he had denied his Lord and who had been hiding behind locked doors, climbs up on the rooftop and preaches to the crowd that had gathered. It says that 3000 were added to the faithful that day. This moment in his life shares how, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have power beyond anything we could imagine, to spread the gospel, help make new disciples and transform the world for Christ. Where do you need to ask God to send anew the Spirit into your life so that you can move beyond fear, to living faithfully?

Following Pentecost, Peter had a holy boldness. When we realize how much God loves us and forgives us, we find the courage and strength to live with a confidence that transforms all areas of our lives. A few days later Peter is with John at the temple, healing and teaching. The authorities do not like it and arrest them. When they are brought before the Sanhedrin, the same group that had conspired to have Jesus crucified, Peter offers a stunning affirmation of Jesus, the crucified one, to them. This was our scripture for today. Weeks before he had denied even knowing Jesus and now he is challenging these leaders of the Jewish people. He ends his defense by saying, "It's up to you to determine whether it is right before God to obey you rather than God. As for us, we can't stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."

He had learned to rely on God's strength. He was living out that verse from Philippians "We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us." The Book of Acts says that those in the council chambers listening to Peter were amazed. How could this illiterate fisherman speak with such authority?

We next encounter Peter when he, after a vision, is asked to go to the house of a Centurion by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius wanted to know more about Jesus and, in a separate vision, had been told to send for Peter. Peter goes with Cornelius' servants. When Peter enters his house, it is probably the first time that he had ever been in the house of a Gentile. Cornelius brings his entire household together to hear Peter. Something amazing happens. The Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household while Peter is preaching. This is the first pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles. Until that moment the disciples thought that it was a special gift reserved for them or would only be shared with the faithful, which at that moment meant Jews. Seeing what is occurring Peter baptized them, even though they were uncircumcised. Peter is still learning, learning that God does not show partiality.

Sometime later there is controversy in the early church. Paul has returned to Jerusalem following his first missionary journey. Some were upset that he was baptizing Gentiles and not forcing them to be first circumcised. He was also not making them follow the purity laws. So a council of the leaders gathered to decide what to do. Paul and Barnabas tell of how the Spirit had led them to their mission. They explained how people were responding. To force them to become Jews before being baptized seemed contrary to what God was doing. Some were not convinced until Peter supports Paul at the first Jerusalem council. He says that circumcision is no longer necessary. He was saying the old laws of scripture no longer apply! This was using the authority Jesus had given him to loosen the interpretation of scripture for a new understanding. We cannot underestimate the importance of this event. Peter's support of Paul allows the Christian faith to spread unabated across the Roman Empire and around the world. This is what makes him great. Without Peter's support Paul's missionary movement might have stalled, the new faith might have become another sect in Judaism and its spreading into all the world would have been severely limited. We owe our faith to Peter!

This is a reminder to all of us that all theology is interpretation. As life changes our understandings change. God is calling us to be open to the Spirit of what God is doing now, instead of blindly hanging on to old interpretations that we are comfortable

with. This always brings with it challenges and controversy. Peter reminds us that God is often doing a new thing!

We know Peter traveled around the Mediterranean Sea for many years. His journeys at times intersected with Paul. There was one memorable moment when Paul had to remind Peter that all were equal in God's eyes. This was after Peter started sitting separately at meals, which ended with communion, with those who were Jews. It began to create division. Peter, when challenged by Paul, saw his error. He continues to learn. We don't know much about these missionary years. They are often called the silent years.

Then there is the legend concerning his death. After the great fires of Rome, which many believed were caused on orders of Emperor Nero, there was a great roundup of Christians. They became the scapegoats accused of setting the fires. Peter was most likely in Rome at this time and arrested. Paul was already there under arrest waiting his appeal to be heard. Peter learned he was to be crucified and legend says that he asked to be crucified head down so as to not die like Jesus. Peter had his flaws but he became faithful and the rock.

There are several things we can learn from the last part of Peter's life. This is perhaps the most important: there can be success after failure. I see too many people who let past events define the rest of their lives. For some, a negative experience occurred and they continue to see themselves in the light of that event. Others, have a brief moment of glory and want to remind people for the rest of their lives about that event. Peter reminds us that God wants us to learn from our past but ultimately set it aside, good or bad, and focus on tomorrow. This is how he became the rock. He would tell his story of denial, not for sympathy or to make excuses, but as a reminder we all fail, but God forgives. Peter's life became a symbol of grace. So let go of your past. Take what you need from it, but focus on today and where it might lead you tomorrow.

Another thing we learn is that no matter what, we can become a good example. Before his death Peter was one of those others looked up to as to how to live your faith courageously in difficult times. They didn't see him as a denier but one who was faithful and rock solid. Saint Francis of Assisi, who lived a few centuries after Peter, was asked

how a Christian should live. His response, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words when necessary." He might have been saying it about Peter. He lived Jesus' gospel message of love, acceptance, of learning, of forgiveness and faithfulness. He became the shepherd of the flock Jesus asked him to be.

I hope you have enjoyed learning more about Peter. He was brash, speaking at times when he should have been listening, jumping into things and then getting scared, and being brave one moment and fearful the next. He is one we can identify with because we are so much like him.

As we leave him, we recall him most for the last years of his life as shepherd and leader of the new faith community comprised of those who believed with Peter that Jesus was the son of the living God, risen from the dead. In this role he reminds us to rely upon God's strength and this will get us through the tough times. Peter, in focusing on what God wanted instead of what he wanted, found strength to be faithful. It wasn't always easy or what society suggested he should do. It was at times very hard and ultimately it led him to his own cross and yet he remained strong. Through it all Peter found love and forgiveness and grace. Gifts offered to each one of us.