

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“A Tale of Two Pillars”

John 21; Acts 9: 1-20

April 22, 2007

I think maybe on this day of dedication where we've called these parents to raise their children in the faith, I think... on this day... it's important to pause and remember and remind ourselves of how important the Church is.

I want to say to those parents who stood here. Don't forget this day.

When you get frustrated along the way with the Church and its limitations and the Church with its imperfections... Don't forget this day.

If along the way... you get crosswise with the Church... don't forget this day.

If you get bored with...

If you get tired from...

If you get confused by... the Church.

Don't forget this day. Don't forget the commitment you made to God and to your child... and don't underestimate the life flowing to you and possibilities for meaning that are yours, because you choose to make your journey within the Church.

In any moment, any one of us can miss or forget... not know, the significance of what the Church is and what it does. Sometimes we forget that God has chosen to work there and that Christ lives there... within it, within us.

So it's a day for remembering that... saying it. Especially as we had these babies up here... and because of these texts we've been asked to hear where two church leaders are called. The Church throughout the ages is saying to us (by putting these two stories here together), **“Sit up and pay attention.”**

It's Saint Peter and Saint Paul...

Two pillars of the Church...

Two followers.... Two leaders.... And in the course of redemptive history... God did something through them and used them in very unique ways. And, of course, we're going to look and see if our stories don't intersect with theirs. But before we do that... in the spirit of this day, we remember who they were and what they did and how it has flowed on through time and into this hour.... And we say, “Thanks be to God,” for these two pillars of faith.

Two pillars – both so strong ... and so different from one another.

Peter is so impulsive... one minute he's drawing a sword to defend Jesus and the next minute he's denying him. Confessing Christ as Messiah in one minute and trying to control Christ in the next... Peter is reactionary. He hears some crazy talk about Jesus being alive and he runs to the tomb and rushes in... rushes out. Impulsive.

Paul, on the other hand, is compulsive.

Paul knows the rules....

And Paul follows the rules.

He's a person of protocol. He slices and dices. I suspect he came out of the womb this way. You know the type... just obnoxiously squeaky clean. Made his bed before he was ever asked. Never got in trouble down at the synagogue. This was in his DNA....

... But also, I would suspect, in his story. Because Paul is just so over the top. Luke tells us earlier in Acts that Paul is **“ravishing the Church... dragging men and women off to prison....”** And did you hear the eerie way Luke describe him in chapter nine?

“He was breathing out murderous threats....” It's in the air he breathes. He's messed up... and it was in his personality.

And in his story... I'd wager.

Someone pushed him too much....

Or did they ignore him too much?

Add to that that the world is broken and fallen and... that evil always seeks a place of expression... and you have someone who **"breathes hate."** He is the Javert of Jerusalem.

Peter... wasn't like that. He seems sort of like a "good-hearted, good-ole-boy" in so many ways. One of the guys... He knows all the fishing jokes that would make you blush. Paul would never let something like that fall from his lips.

They're just so different... these two.

Peter... in the boat... naked of all things, out on the sea of Galilee, holding a stinky old net in one hand and a beverage in the other.

Paul dressed up in a three-piece suit and power tie... with his brief case stuffed full of papers signed by important people.

Such a contrast... One is focused, on a mission... from God... he thinks. He is dangerous... as are most folks who have great passion for God and great certainty about themselves... and what they think... and what they know... and what they're supposed to do.

Peter, it seems, is on the other end of that focused continuum, to a fault. At least the way John lays out the story, he is unfocused.

Remember... he saw Jesus on resurrection Easter Sunday night... Then again the next Sunday night as Jesus showed up for Thomas... He's seen him twice. Jesus has, in John's telling of it, breathed his Spirit into them and sent them. That's what Apostle means: "sent" – sent into the world to impart his forgiveness.

It's been quite a couple of weeks... And in response to it, Simon says... **"Umm... I think I'll go fishing."**

Do you see how different he is from Paul? I don't think Peter knows what he wants. Maybe in the first days after Easter he's all aglow and ready to save the world... but Peter being Peter... he waffles, maybe... not certain changing the world is for him.

Or maybe his failure is still too fresh and he's pretty sure he's not up to it. What do you think Peter thinks every morning when the cock crows?

Is he dragging too much despair...

or self doubt...

or maybe even just self-care...?

"Would it be okay if I resign this "rock of the Church" position? Can I just be Simon again?"

Or maybe he's just tired... in shock... and going fishing means he's going to play. Paul doesn't play. Paul wouldn't know a flush from a straight, or a par from a bogie, or the 'fox trot' from the 'hustle.' You don't want Paul on your team for charades. He's too exacting. He never made a 'B'.

Peter's report card wouldn't have qualified him for anything... They're just so different.

They do have this in common... They seem to have extraordinary passion... charisma... And there's no question that some part of God... some aspect of what God is, is flowing through them.

It's true, by the way, with all of us. God's nature, God's eternal brilliance, explodes out into existence. Some of it shows up in a bluebonnet or a sunset or a wild sea. And some of it is in you or me...

God's joy in the way that one of us always seems to bounce into a room.

God's order flows into the world and into one of us and something gets organized like it ought to be.

God's compassion shows up in one of you in some boardroom fighting for justice. God's serenity... in your calm ways.

God's creativity in your spontaneity.

God's passion in your romantic side.

God's essence is imparted and imparted in specific ways in us and was, too, in Peter and in Paul. They were bearers of Divine energy.

But you know what happens... That essential thing... gets dinked up by the world's fallenness. Or that divine flow gets misdirected by some pain. And look what happens... the gift that is uniquely placed in us, that is our essence, in fact, becomes our problem. Our blessing becomes the curse. Our weakness is just our strength pushed in the wrong direction. It's too much of a good thing. And you see it in these two.

Peter's spontaneity is inconsistency. Paul's intensity is madness, breathing hate. Peter's courage takes him impulsively too quickly into situations he can't deal with. Paul's brilliance becomes arrogance. Peter's capacity for feeling is emotionality that can't be sustained. Paul's capacity to name things makes things rigidly black and white. Their essence has been misdirected. They have that in common.

But they also have in common, what we all have in common... That in spite of our misdirection and maybe because of it... Jesus comes to us. That's it really. What we all can say this morning... **"We're all misdirected... sometimes into a real mess... and Jesus has come to us."** That's the story in these stories. That is our story.

Peter is out on the boat and then on the beach... eating fish again with his friend... And at one point Jesus says, **"Wanna take a walk?"** And they do. And the rest of the fellas know how badly they need to talk... so they don't follow.

Jesus and Peter chat some awkwardly... you know how it is when there's something between two old friends. Every now and then one of them skips a seashell into the surf... Just about the time Peter's about to blurt out **"Lord, I'm so sorry,"** Jesus says, **"Peter... do you love me... more than these?"** gesturing to the boats they'd just passed.

"You know I do."

"Well... then feed my lambs..."

And Peter is sort of scratching his head and about to change the subject... and Jesus asks his question again... and then again, much to Peter's frustration. Making it very clear that Peter's love for him has to move beyond a willingness to grab a sword or swim excitedly to shore.

It's clear... at least for Peter in that moment... that love of the Lord must be expressed in love of people. **"Loving them is loving me..."** and that's not just a metaphor, Peter.

Love of God is love for others ... there is no other measure. We are blessed to be a blessing. Loved to love. Chosen so sheep get fed... so the world gets loved.

That's the call... but Easter's glow can fade so fast... Do you know what I mean? All the 'Alleluias' get lost in a kind of predictable amnesia. And there are the boats and the nets and everything about our lives that would be easier to give ourselves to other than to lambs who need loving...

And there are so many of them...

**"Can't I just go fishing...
just do my thing?"**

Well... yeah... But... **"Do you love me?"** Jesus is going find you and Jesus is going to ask that?

Or maybe... when Jesus finds you, the question won't be from an old friend who's wondering... It won't have that sound to it. It'll sound more like a parent who's watched an older child do something so wrong... and is devastated.

"Saul... Saul..." Anyone ever had to say your name twice?

And the question's not, **"Do you love me?"** But it's **"Why are you persecuting me?"** And that's not just a metaphor, Saul. **"Saul, Saul, you're killing me. Why?"**

That was his life... the path he was on. When Ananias goes to see Paul... he literally says, **"The Lord Jesus, who appeared to you in the way in which you were going."** Jesus shows up in the middle of his path and he is going to show up in the path you're walking as well.

Because he wants you to, as Luke put it, **"to belong to The Way."** Maybe it won't be this dramatic... but often it seems it is for those who are hurtling down the wrong path.

Paul was a hateful...
driven, arrogant man...
and Jesus had to knock him down.
And take his sight so he could see. You know...

I know we must be very careful about how we talk about God's involvement in our lives... what God does and does not do. We must be careful. Especially when it comes to someone who's been knocked down. And I should probably never name it for you... you'll never hear me make the claim... but... you might at least wonder, if you get knocked down, if perhaps the Divine hasn't come looking for you. I wouldn't put it past him.

You matter that much... and so does the world... So, the Lord comes to the likes of us... Bent and misdirected as we are. Because we matter and the world matters.

And he finds us...
and confronts us...
and redeems and redirects us.

He finds us and comforts us and restores us and redirects us. And the church gets someone like Simon Peter. And the church gets someone like Paul.

It doesn't happen overnight. It didn't for Peter and Paul. They both had a long way to go before those Divine qualities in them were pure. There clearly are struggles for the both of them... but there they are now... in the Church... The both of them, different as they are, in the Body of Christ.

And to say we're all better for it would be a great understatement.

Cameron told us at Lectionary Breakfast that there's an icon with the two of them... arm in arm... We wondered if it was like one of those pictures where someone says, "**Okay now, Peter and Paul... put your arms around each other.... Come on.**" I've never seen it... but maybe if you look through it, as you should, you'll see some truth.

Something about there being no Jew or Gentile in the Church of Jesus Christ. Some truth about there being no slave or free. No male or female... No fisherman or CEO.

If you stare at it... pray with it... I bet you hear the Lord whispering to you about how important our unity is... How important every gift is... and every essence flowing through you that can be redeemed and gift the church.

Peter and Paul were both in the Church.... Impulsive and compulsive. Free-form and protocolled. They embraced... these two. And maybe they weren't always smiling for the camera, especially not early on. But I want to believe... and know... that in time the embrace was real.

It could happen!!!
It can happen!!!

It does... all the time in and through the Church. Someone's impulsivity meets up with grace and it becomes the gift it was meant to be. Someone's neurotic compulsivity gets forgiven enough that that person becomes a blessing to the Church.

Or, at the very least, what once drove us crazy becomes an occasion to practice all we've preached. And we just gracefully smile at one another and embrace... and not just for the camera.

It happens all the time.... And so do a million other things which we should never, ever forget. And for which we all should every day... "**Thanks be to God.**"

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