

"IF YOU WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS"
St. John 13:31-38; 14:12-17

Text: "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." St. John 14:16-17

The New Testament paints two pictures of St. Peter. One portrait is found in the Gospels and the other is found in the Book of Acts. The picture we see of St. Peter in the Gospels is the picture of a failure. Now, the fact is, Peter has a lot of admirable characteristics. He has a lot of qualities that we can admire. At the same time, however, we discover each time that he never reaches his potential. He always fails. See how it works! One moment in a burst of insight he cries out to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But in the next breath we hear Jesus say to him, "Get you behind me Satan!" Or again, one night--caught in a storm on the Sea Galilee--the disciples were startled to see Jesus coming to them, walking across the sea. "Bid me come to you on the water!" cried Peter in a burst of faith. Yet, after he clambers over the side of the boat and finds himself on the water amidst the wild waves, that faith evaporates and on the point of sinking, he cries out, "Lord, save me." On another occasion, when Jesus foretells how the disciples will desert him, Peter cries out in absolute confidence, "Though all men should desert you, yet will I not desert you." Yet, we have only to turn the page when we come to this, "They all forsook him and fled." Then, in our scripture for this morning, we hear Peter confidently proclaim, "I will lay down my life for you." But only a few short hours later, we hear this same Peter in the courtyard of the High Priest cursing and swearing and saying, "I know not the man."

Well, I don't know about you, but I can identify with Peter. I find myself making all sorts of resolves and promises to the Lord. I find myself pledging faithfulness and righteous living. Then, before I know it, I have broken every commitment, violated every promise and failed in every pledge. Do you have that problem, too? I suspect most of us do. Like Peter we have the very best of intentions and we mean to do the right thing, the thing Jesus would want us to do. But the fact is, just like Peter, we find ourselves failing.

But there is a second portrait of Peter. It is found in the Book of Acts. It is a different sort of picture we see this time. Here we see a humble and devout man standing before a multitude. It is a dangerous situation, but he shares with the crowd what Jesus has done for them and the Bible tells us thousands respond. Again, we see him on his way to the temple, stopping at the entrance gate which is called the Beautiful Gate. There sits a beggar, lame from birth. Peter stops and speaks to him, "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk." Once more, we find him standing before the Jewish council. They hold the power of life and death over him and they have ordered him not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus. Peter speaks and these are his words, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." But see him once more. It is another occasion when he is leaving the presence of the council. The Bible says, "They called in the apostles, and beat them..." Peter is walking away with his back a mass of cuts and bruises from the whip, but the Bible says, "they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (of Jesus)."

This portrait of Peter, so different from the first, finds its completion in legend. According to this legend, Peter is in Rome. Terrible persecution has broken out against the Christians. Peter is fleeing Rome. Behind him can be seen the flames of Christians being burned at the stake. Behind him rise the sounds of pitiful screams as human flesh is torn by wild animals. Behind him can be heard the thud of spear and sword and mace falling on the flesh of Christians as gladiators doing their gruesome work bring the spectators to their feet with screams of laughter and derision as Christians die. As Peter leaves all this behind, he sees a vision of Christ walking toward the city. "Domine," says Peter, "Quo vadis?" That is, "Master, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "I am going into the city to die again with my people." Then it is that Peter plants his staff in the ground, turns back to go to the city and his death. As the legend does, when they crucified him, Peter asked to be crucified with his head down because he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as did his Lord.

So there are two pictures of Peter in the Bible. In one portrait he is a man of great resolve, but a man who always fails. He does the things he never intended to do. But in the other picture of Peter we see a man of courage and resolve, a man who faces even death without fear. What made the difference? How did Peter change?

Well, if we knew the answer to that it would mean a great deal, would it not? Most of us have our lives characterized by failures. We have good intentions, the best of purposes, but in spite of our best, we still fall short. If we could discover Peter's secret--if we could discover what he found out--perhaps we, too, could have his success, his resolve, his triumph.

Let's see if we can discover Peter's secret. In our Scripture this morning Peter says he wants to follow Jesus. Now, Jesus makes an interesting reply. He says to Peter, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward." Does that not mean that something is going to happen to Peter so that he can follow Jesus? Let's see if we can discover what is going to happen.

Notice that Peter says, "Why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Peter is ready to die for Jesus, or so he thinks. But Jesus replies, "Will you lay down your life for me?...the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times."

Here is the first secret. Peter could not die for Jesus until he knew that Jesus had died for him.

Does that make sense to you? Peter thought a great deal of Jesus; he loved him very much. But in spite of that, when the chips were down and life was threatened, Peter either fled or denied the Lord. It was not until after the crucifixion--not until he understood that Jesus had died for him, for his salvation, his forgiveness--that Peter had the heart to die for Jesus.

Isn't that true in your life and mine? I don't know anybody who is living an effective and successful Christian life who doesn't believe Jesus died for him. You see, there are many in the world today who believe in the principles of Jesus. They believe that the teachings of Jesus are the finest in all of human history. They believe he was a good person who went about doing good and men ought to emulate him. Yet the fact is, none of them are really following Jesus. As a matter of fact, one of the great struggles going on in our denomination and in our sister denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, is the struggle over who and what Jesus was and is. Many Presbyterian ministers today are denying that Jesus is divine, born of a virgin. They are denying that his death on the cross has any vital significance in our lives today. They are denying that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no man comes to the Father but by him. (St. John 14:6)

But under the influence of that kind of faith, the church is dying. It has lost its primary goal of leading men to Jesus, its energies are being dissipated in an agenda that is set by the world. Any humanist today would gladly accept the message that so many advocate today. Why? Because it is not a message that has the crucified Jesus at its center.

No, no one wants to die for Jesus until they know that Jesus has died for them. Isn't that true in your life? Before you believed that Jesus had died for you, were you willing to die for him? Were you willing to tithe, to be obedient to his laws, to study the Word, to be God's man or God's woman? No. Only when you fell at the foot of the cross and knew that he died for you, that your sins were washed away in his blood, were you willing to die for him.

I suspect there are some present here today who are not living the kind of life you want to live. You have good intentions, the best of purposes, and you really want to be a good person. But until you fall at the foot of the cross, until you know that Jesus died for you will you be willing to die for him?

That's the first secret that Peter discovered that changed his life. Here is the second secret. Jesus made Peter a promise that day. Here is that promise which is our text for today, "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth...for he dwells with you, and will be in you." Yes, Jesus told Peter that when he understood that Jesus had died for him; when he had accepted Jesus as his savior, God would send the Holy Spirit into Peter's heart to be with him.

Well, that's what Peter needed. He needed a power greater than himself in his heart. He needed a power greater than his own to help him live his life for Jesus. He needed something larger than his own strength to help him be God's person. That will be true for you--it is true for me. No matter how good our resolves are, by ourselves in our own strength, we will always fail. It is only when we have been filled with the power of the Spirit of God and the promise of Jesus is fulfilled in us, only then will we have the equipment, the ability to be what we want to be.

That's why we have two pictures of Peter in the Bible. In the first picture, he is a well-intended person. He means always to do the best and the right thing. The only problem is, he always failed. But in the second picture we have a man living a triumphant, victorious life--a life committed to serving his Lord, even to death on a cross in Rome. The difference was the two-fold secret Peter discovered. He discovered that he could not truly die for Jesus until he understood that Jesus had died for him. He discovered that in his own strength he failed, but when his soul was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, he could do all things. And that was what he needed.

Is that what you need this morning?