

1 Sermon, April 29, 2012

Texts: John 21:1-19, Acts 5:26-42

Title: "Easter Renewal: Peter"

As I see it, Peter got it right about half the time.

Of course, the story of Peter in the Bible is far from complete. There's only a little slice of the life of Peter in the New Testament. But what is there shows Peter, before Jesus' resurrection, doing only fair to middlin'.

He got it wrong when he wanted to put up a booth

He got it wrong when he denied Jesus

He got it right when he said what nobody else would say to Jesus – "You are the messiah."

He got it right when he got out of the boat to walk on water – well, a little bit wrong, too, because he started to sink – but then right again because he trusted Jesus to get him out of his problem.

He got it right when he ran to the tomb after the women came back and told them the tomb was empty.

Peter seemed to "get it" only about half the time.

That's not doing too bad.

If we got things right about half the time, we'd be doing pretty well. Batting 500 is a good average.

In today's reading, after the resurrection, Peter got it right – mostly.

Peter got it right when he put on his presentable garment and dove into the sea, even though it wasn't his idea to recognize Jesus.

Then there was this little conversation between Peter and Jesus – Jesus gave him a mission. "Take care of my sheep."

The conversation is a little more complicated than it may seem. When Jesus asks Peter "Do you love me?" the first two times Jesus asks the question he uses the Greek word "agape." This is the love of John 3:16 (For God so loved (agaped) the world ...), and John 15 (This is my new commandment, that you love (agape) one another as I have loved

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(agape) you). This love is unreserved, unconditional, unwavering and totally oriented for the good of the other.

However, when Peter responds to Jesus, "Yes Lord, you know I love you," he uses a different word - philios - which means "friendship." Philios is a good thing; but it's more of a buddy-buddy kind of thing than an "I will give myself for you" kind of thing.

So the first two encounters might be better translated as:

"Peter, are you fully devoted to me?"

"Yes Lord, you know I am your friend."

Peter can't quite bring himself to use the same verb. He has gotten cautious. Peter had gotten burned when he promised Jesus "I will never deny you" and then denied Jesus three times.

So now, it seems, Peter isn't quite so sure of himself.

Peter may aspire to agape love, the kind of selfless, unconditional love that God has for us – but Peter knows he is human, and he promises what he knows he can deliver.

The wonderful thing about this story is that, when Jesus asks Peter for the third time, "Do you love me?" Jesus uses "philios." Jesus asks Peter, "Are you my friend?"

Jesus comes down to Peter's level, and you can almost hear Peter's sigh of relief, when he replies, "Lord, you know every thing, you know I am your friend."

The love that Peter can actually offer - philios - may not be agape love, but it is good enough love. Jesus accepts us as we are; there is no need to pretend that we are perfect.

Was this a moment of big change for Peter?

I think so.

I think it may have been the time when Peter fully accepted God's love through Jesus. Jesus accepted Peter for who he was, and what he could offer, and I think it might have really sunk in at that moment.

And, you know, after this, Peter seemed to get it right more often – his batting average seemed to get close to 1,000. If you look in the book of Acts, you see Peter filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, teaching,

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healing, encouraging boldly. In fact it seems that Peter adopts the boldness of Jesus himself. And in fact Peter gets thrown in prison for it.

Are you with me?

This story is not just something about someone 2,000 years ago. The story applies to you and me right now.

We don't always get it right. We try, but we don't always understand where Christ is leading us.

We may try to have unconditional agape love, but we just don't quite manage. We don't even manage to love *ourselves* unconditionally and accept our *own* mistakes, so how can we do that for others?

So, when we can't love ourselves unconditionally, at least we can respect ourselves and respect others and offer friendship.

And then Jesus throws in a curve ball. As it says at the end of today's reading:

Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my sheep. I tell you for certain that when you were a young man, you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will hold out your hands. Then others will wrap your belt around you and lead you where you don't want to go."

Jesus said this to tell how Peter would die and bring honor to God. Then he said to Peter, "Follow me!"

Following Jesus, for Peter, means death. The tradition is that Peter died during the persecutions of Emperor Nero in AD 64. The tradition is that Peter said that he was not worthy to be crucified as Jesus was, so they played a cruel joke on Peter and crucified him upside-down.

Nowhere do we see in Scripture that following Jesus will be easy. Transformative, yes. Easy, no.

Peter was changed. Did he have it easy, no.

But once he trusted that he was fully accepted by the unconditional love of God, it gave him all the courage he needed. And that courage changed the world.

If you think about it, the Christians we remember are not the ones who take it easy. The Christians we remember are the ones who take on the difficult.

There is some of Peter in my Christian journey.

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I'm sure that there's some of Peter in your Christian journey, too.

I'm hoping that God will grant enough grace to me and you that there will be more of Peter in all of us, especially the courage that comes from knowing you are fully accepted by the God of all.

Jesus later appeared to his disciples along the shore of Lake Tiberias. Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, and the brothers James and John, were there, together with two other disciples. Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing!"

The others said, "We will go with you." They went out in their boat. But they didn't catch a thing that night.

Early the next morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize who he was. Jesus shouted, "Friends, have you caught anything?"

"No!" they answered.

So he told them, "Let your net down on the right side of your boat, and you will catch some fish."

They did, and the net was so full of fish that they could not drag it up into the boat.

Jesus' favorite disciple told Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon heard that it was the Lord, he put on the clothes that he had taken off while he was working. Then he jumped into the water. The boat was only about a hundred yards from shore. So the other disciples stayed in the boat and dragged in the net full of fish.

When the disciples got out of the boat, they saw some bread and a charcoal fire with fish on it. Jesus told his disciples, "Bring some of the fish you just caught."

Simon Peter got back into the boat and dragged the net to shore. In it were one hundred fifty-three large fish, but still the net did not rip.

Jesus said, "Come and eat!" But none of the disciples dared ask who he was. They knew he was the Lord. Jesus took the bread in his hands and gave some of it to his disciples. He did the same with the fish. This was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from death.

When Jesus and his disciples had finished eating, he asked, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than the others do?" **[b]**

Simon Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know I do!"

"Then feed my lambs," Jesus said.

Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you!"

"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus told him.

Jesus asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus had asked him three times if he loved him. So he told Jesus, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you."

Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep. I tell you for certain that when you were a young man, you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will hold out your hands. Then others will wrap your belt around you and lead you where you don't want to go."

Jesus said this to tell how Peter would die and bring honor to God. Then he said to Peter, "Follow me!" John 21:1-19 (CEV)

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"Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them--in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah." Acts 5:26-42, NRSV.

When Toyohiko Kagawa was asked to come and speak to

the seminarians at Princeton--one of his alma maters--he went willingly and eagerly. **Toyohiko had been displeased with much of his own seminary experience because he found that the students there were far more interested in arguments, rhetoric, persuasion, and the fine points of doctrine and textual study.** He repeatedly begged them simply to live out

what Jesus had taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He knew he was asking for much of the seminarians but he hoped that they would--as far as people go--be the most likely to answer a call to genuinely and sincerely practiced allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Savior. When he finished speaking to the assembled Princetonians he accepted some questions and then dismissed them quietly and gathered his things from the podium. **As he was doing so, two of the seminarians turned to each other in their seats and discussed his lecture.**

One insisted that it had not been quite what they had expected from a man who was so well respected around the seminary. Turning to his friend, he quipped, **"He didn't have much to say, did he?"** They shared their own little laugh knowing that they were better educated than Toyohiko but not knowing that they were still fools. Both of them had heard of his background and how he had been the illegitimate child of a powerful Japanese man and a geisha. He was hated by his mother and liked by his father but soon both his mother and father had died and he was orphaned. He was given over as the ward of the widowed wife of his father. **She and her mother struggled not to resent little Toyohiko because it had not been his decision to be a child of infidelity but they**

failed in their struggle and Toyohiko knew he was hated by them. They sent him away to a boarding school. He began attending a bible study given by a Christian minister so that he could learn and practice his English. Yet while he was learning the language, he was hearing and considering the truths and teachings of the Faith of the minister. When he was a teenager, he converted to the Christian Faith that had gripped him by the heart over a long time of reflection and meditation. **Soon after this conversion he knew clearly that he would be a minister of the Gospel that had spoken to him when he had walked in darkness, desperation, and death.**

Though they didn't seem to prize it, those two young seminarians knew that after receiving more education in preparation for the calling he was already living into, **Toyohiko had stepped out in faith and moved into the Shinkawa district of Kobe.** These slums were some of the worst--if not the absolute worst--in all of Japan. He lived in a three-walled dwelling so filthy and small (only six feet wide by six feet long) that it would be an overstatement to call it a shack. **For nearly fifteen years he tended to the sick, suffering, hungry, poor, and dying in Shinkawa.** Toyohiko was able to make a little money (not nearly as much as he would have been able to if he had moved out of Shinkawa, though) but he spent it all on medicine, food, and clothing for those who came to him asking for it. He was regularly abused and beaten for his love and compassion. At one point, a band of thugs accosted him knowing him as an **"easy mark"** who would give over anything to them not out of fear but out of

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love. They demanded his clothing and mentioned that they knew he was a Christian. He took off his clothing and handed it over to the criminals and they walked away with filthy rags and **an increasing awareness of the goodness of Toyohiko's God** and their own inherent sinfulness shown

by their willingness to beat and strip a poor and loving man in the slums.

Those two young seminarians probably had no idea that Toyohiko had spent nearly every night for nearly fifteen years tending for the sick and homeless in his own meager dwelling. **He gave over his bed to the sick and filthy people he loved and slept in the cold with little to protect himself from the elements.** He gave over his food and drink with such regularity that he was regularly ill from hunger. He did not have intense theological debates but he regularly lived out the teachings of Jesus in a way that granted him an inherent understanding of the Gospel that Jesus brought into this world. **Every night for four years he held the hand of a murderer as that murderer drifted off into a fitful sleep in Toyohiko's own bed.** The murderer could not bear what he had done any longer but Toyohiko still spoke of forgiveness to and refused to abandon the poor man who feared isolation and judgment. He organized workers in the slums and shipyards all while fighting for increased voting rights in Japan. Eventually, he was arrested and **held in prison for two particular crimes: 1) he organized the voiceless so that they might speak in unison to those with power and be heard, and 2) he apologized to the Chinese for the Japanese occupation of portions of China.** Toyohiko's commitment to peace--one he felt compulsory for all who hoped to follow Jesus even if it cost them their lives--made him a dangerous criminal in the eyes of Japan.

Perhaps the two young seminarians knew that a terrible earthquake hit Tokyo and Yokohama in 1923.

The ruins of those cities were flooded with the sick, suffering, hungry, poor, and dying. **The government was overwhelmed by the need and was uninitiated into taking care of its citizens since it had been so long practicing power and control and forsaking compassion and mercy.** So they came to Toyohiko in prison and released him. They knew he had made a difference in the lives of those needing help and they also knew that it was Toyohiko who would be able to do it again. They made him Chief of Social Welfare and offered him a home and a sizable salary. He rejected them and insisted that he could neither help the poor from a position of comfort nor allow his Christian duty to be purchased. **He slowly helped rebuild cities devastated by earthquake, neglect, and need.** For this he was lauded and honored even as he insisted that he was only doing the bare minimum of what

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God had called him to do.

As the two seminarians continued to share their own criticism of Toyohiko they ignored that Toyohiko was struggling to see the steps he was trying to descend. He had acquired a serious eye disease because of his practices of offering hospitality even in the slums. Those he lived with were sick and soon so was Toyohiko. As the two men missed the point of all they had heard and continued to pass the drug of intelligent pride back and forth an elderly lady overheard them and interrupted them. She leaned forward to interject one simple sentence into their conversation while pointing at Toyohiko as he carefully descended the stairs: **"You don't need to say much when you're hanging on a cross."**