

## **“The Rehabilitation of Peter”**

Third Sunday of Easter (Health and Welfare Sunday)

Scripture Readings: Matthew 16:13-23; John 21:15-19

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Ten days ago I completed what I thought at the time was the final draft of my sermon for today. It focused on Peter, who, next to Jesus himself, is the second most central character in the gospels, and its title was *The Rehabilitation of Peter*. His real name was Simon bar Jonah, which is Aramaic for Simon, son of John, but one day at a place called Caesarea Philippi Jesus gave him a new name—Peter—and the gospels refer to him mostly by that name, even when talking about him at times that preceded Caesarea Philippi. There is a certain irony in the name, which means *rock*, because throughout the gospels we find examples of Peter’s behavior and attitudes that show he was anything but rock-like. He was impetuous, unreliable, and often slow to understand what Jesus was all about.

Both before and after he received his new name we see him fail in his faith, misunderstand Jesus’ message, and act in ways contrary to Jesus’ teaching. In the story of Jesus walking on water, Peter asks Jesus to bid him come; and when Jesus does so, Peter shows faith by getting out of the boat and starting to walk to Jesus, only to become frightened and begin to sink. After listening to Jesus speak about forgiveness, Peter one day asks how many times he has to forgive one who has wronged him, suggesting that seven times might be an extreme number, and Jesus says “seventy-seven times,” by which I understand him to mean you can’t put a limit on forgiving.

In fact, right after Jesus gives Simon the name Rock and goes on to tell his followers about his coming suffering, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, only to receive a rebuke from Jesus. At the scene of the transfiguration, Peter proposes making the place where it occurred into a shrine, and Jesus’ actions remind the disciples that his ministry—and theirs—is to take place among the people and not in a shrine. There is the scene in Gethsemane when Jesus asks Peter, James, and John to keep watch while he prays, and he returns from his praying three times and each time finds the three asleep, not able to watch with him even one brief hour. I am tempted to mention the moment of Jesus’ capture when one of the disciples cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave and is told by Jesus that “those who live by the sword will perish by the sword”; it sounds like the impetuous and volatile Peter, but his name is not mentioned. And then, as Jesus is being crucified, we remember the three times Peter denies that he knows Jesus and is part of his entourage. The firmness and steadiness we think of in a rock we just do not see in the gospel reports about Peter.

My original sermon concluded with a mention of the account in John where Jesus rehabilitates Peter by offering him three opportunities to confess his love for his master. And I have just given you a one-page summary of what was a four-page sermon.

Something deep within my being, however, has compelled me merely to summarize that sermon and move on to comment on certain matters surrounding the death of the man acknowledged by

Roman Catholics as Pope John Paul II. I do not intend to say much about the man himself; so far as I know he was a compassionate, caring human being, to be commended for his leadership in matters related to world peace and for acknowledging centuries of Catholic antisemitism. My impression, which could be erroneous, is that he did little to effect a reconciliation with other branches of Christendom, he refused to rethink the Catholic condemnation of homosexuality while failing to deal aggressively with a priesthood tainted by the scandals of pedophilia; nor did he move his church beyond a two-thousand-year subordination of women in the church. My concern, however, is not so much about this man as it is about the whole idea of the papacy and the way we who are Protestants relate to it.

The history of the papacy is not a pretty story. Many popes have used their position to gain political power, many have been consumed by greed, some have condemned heretics and reformers to death, only to have other popes later on canonize a few of them as saints. In spite of this history of abuses and scandals, the First Vatican Council, under Pope Pius IX, declared in July, 1870, that the papacy is—and has been from its beginning with Peter—infallible in matters of faith and morals. The vote approving the findings of the First Vatican Council, including the idea of papal infallibility—was 533 to 2. I haven't been able to find out what happened to the two dissenters. Protestants, of course, disagree with the idea of papal infallibility, as do more than a few modern Catholics.

Accepting the likelihood that some of you may have begun your life in the church as Catholics, I have to acknowledge that my personal heritage is rooted in Scottish Presbyterianism; the Protestantism of the early Reformation flows strongly in my veins. My ancestors in the faith—Jan Hus, Huldreich Zwingli, John Calvin, and John Knox--regarded the pope as the anti-Christ. So did Martin Luther, who went so far as to excommunicate Pope Leo X. And, despite all the modernization that the Catholic Church has engaged in since the Second Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII and despite all the yearning and effort many of us have spent to develop ecumenicity in the church, I confess that much of that early Reformation thinking is close to the surface of my thoughts and attitudes. I should not be surprised by all the media coverage of John Paul's death and the overwhelming response given it by people all over the world, but I am; and I am even more startled by my own emotions as I have followed the news coverage.

Perhaps my problem is that I am jealous. No one has ever paid me the kind of attention that is being given the pope. And, I do admit that I resent it. It irritates me no end when the media wants a definition of "Christian values" they turn to the pope—or to Jerry Falwell—rather than to us. So, insofar as this sermon is the result of jealousy on my part, I beg your forgiveness. On the other hand, both as a Protestant and as an American who is a strong believer in the separation of church and state, I must object to the whole idea that our government recognizes the Vatican as a state. I have been an admirer of President Harry S. Truman, but I believe he made a huge mistake when he appointed an ambassador to the Vatican, thus recognizing the Vatican as a political entity. And it is that official recognition of the Vatican as a state that is behind the current administration's sending an official delegation to John Paul's funeral. I have no problem with millions of Catholics going to Rome; I don't even have a problem with non-Catholic admirers of this particular church leader going as individuals; but I do object strongly to having

our country and this administration send an official delegation. It implies an approval of one branch of Christianity that is not given to other branches—and, in fact, I would object to having any branch of government sending official delegations to any religious group—or to all religious groups. And I am bothered at the attention given this event by the supposedly objective and secular press. It is quite legitimate for Catholics to refer to the leader of their church as “the Holy Father”. It is also entirely inappropriate for a secular press, for non-Catholics, and for political leaders of our country, to refer to the pope in that manner publicly. And no agency of government in this country, this state, this city, or this school district should have flags flown at half-mast. Of course, you have every right to disagree with me about that. But as a Protestant, I protest.

It is not just the idea of the infallibility of the papacy that offends me. The Roman Catholic emphasis on what is called Apostolic Succession offends me as well. Believing that Jesus selected Peter to be the foundation stone of his church, Roman Catholic leaders early on claimed Peter as the first pope, and the legitimacy of church leadership ever since has relied on the idea of Apostolic Succession. This is a belief that Peter laid hands on the bishops and priests and that the continuity and legitimacy of the church is dependent on having as church leaders only men who have been ordained by those who themselves were ordained by someone who was ordained by . . . Peter. And if the leadership of your church happens not to have that continuity of leadership from the present all the way back to Peter, then you are not part of the legitimate church. And while the group who laid their hands on my head when I was ordained may have included someone who had been ordained by someone who was ordained by someone all the way back to Peter, to me that has nothing to do with the legitimacy of the church or of my ordination. It is not the continuity of church leadership that is important; rather it is that church leaders and members seek to have some identity with and obedience to the will of him who established his church, namely Jesus.

I have worried that I may come across mostly as negative with this sermon. Strictly speaking, though, a protest is not necessarily negative. The word means to testify for something, and testifying for something sometimes involves stating what a person is against. What I have seen from many Protestants and Americans in their response to the death of the pope indicates that we have forgotten who we are.

I do, however, want to end the sermon on a positive note, and to do that I return to Peter. The passage read today from Matthew tells us that Jesus gave Simon a name which means “Rock” and then said it is on this rock that he will build his church. This is the basis for the Catholic claim that Peter is the first pope. But the passage can be interpreted in other ways. In fact, the idea that Peter was the first pope did not surface until the third century. I have summarized my original sermon, in which I spelled out with some detail the fallibility that Peter exhibited in his behavior and in his understanding of Jesus, at least before his rehabilitation. Even after his rehabilitation—indeed rather late in his life—he was still very slow to come to an understanding of Jesus’ mission beyond the Jews. The rehabilitation of Peter in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John was not an event that made him into a strong, infallible, and perfect leader; rather it was an act on Jesus’ part that brought Peter back into his fold. But Peter needs to be rehabilitated again, not that we

should make him out to be a strong, reliable, and infallible leader but rather that we see him as the flawed human being he was. The rock on which Jesus has built—and is building—his church is not the solid and impregnable and steadfast material we think of when we use the word *rock*. Rather, the church is built on people who are weak, uncertain, yes, and often just plain wrong—like Peter. He is building his church on you and on me. We are recipients of his grace, which accepts us with all our failings and which, from time to time, transforms even us into powerful witnesses to his truth.