

IN PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

Last Sunday we talked about Peter's first conversion, Phase One of the Christian pilgrimage. Peter may not be an exact model or illustration of this phase for everybody, but his pattern is classic, and close enough to be more than instructive for most of us.

Phase Two is not really a second conversion – that comes next Sunday. But there is a definite second phase that follows the first conversion in most of the stories of the followers. We called the first phase FROM FISHERMAN TO DISCIPLE. We might call the second phase FROM DISCIPLE TO CHIEF APOSTLE. To be sure, the way our world thinks and measures, we cannot all become the chief apostle. It is nevertheless true that we move from the great initial enthusiasm of a first conversion into a time of hard work, responsibility, and serious effort to be useful and effective for our Lord. The second phase is not a *change* of direction; it is a development of the new direction that came with the first conversion.

Peter worked hard and advanced in the calling which he had heard and answered. He moved into a position of leadership and responsibility. The weight of it all became heavier, and his conviction and confidence and effectiveness grew steadily. This period goes from early in Jesus' ministry until just shortly before the crucifixion. Peter became First Vice President of the New Kingdom Movement. His prestige increased beyond anything he had known in his old fisherman's life. The crowds, the excitement, and the popularity of Jesus' ministry were making Peter famous too. The burden and pressure were increasing to match, as they always do. We imagine, or at least I do, that Peter was essentially an optimistic, happy-go-lucky, freewheeling sort of person. But in Phase Two, we sense the increasing weight that goes with Peter's new role. He starts *trying too hard*; he starts *needing to be right*; he shows more and more *defensiveness* toward that which threatens or disagrees with Jesus or with what Jesus is trying to do. None of us have ever had such problems, of course, but putting humans into any position of responsibility or caring raises instant tension: Can we live up to it? Can we show ourselves worthy? Can we maintain the level of performance implied and expected?

Peter identifies himself with Jesus and what Jesus is doing. It has become his whole focus and identity. He is it, and it is him. The success of the Movement around Jesus has become Peter's

whole life. We can feel him becoming more and more “driven” to make it come out the way he wants it to. Peter’s decision to follow and his reason for being – his life and soul and worth and value – are all locked up in the outcome and eventual success of Jesus’ earthly ministry. This is not true, as you know, for Jesus Himself. But it is the epitome and essence of Phase Two for the followers – the disciples.

It is probably not necessary to convince you of what you already know, but since I am making such a point of it, perhaps I should also demonstrate that this is true of Peter’s story.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, Peter is the outstanding member of the twelve. Among the twelve, Peter is always named first. (Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13) He is first to be called to follow Jesus, and first to be named in the list of the twelve. To think of the apostles is to think first of Peter. If I had asked any of you to name the twelve apostles as you entered the sanctuary this morning, you would all have named Peter first, and most of you would not even remember the names of half of the others.

Peter takes the initiative, whether foolhardy or commendable. In most of the conversations between Jesus and His disciples, Peter is the one who speaks up first – the one who speaks for the others. We keep coming across phrases like, “*Simon and those who were with him*” and “*Peter and those who were with him.*” (Mark 1:36; Luke 8:45; Luke 9:32) When an inner circle of the twelve is mentioned, Peter is always included and always named first: the miraculous catch of fish; the raising of Jairus’ daughter; the transfiguration; the scenario in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is Peter and John who are sent to prepare the Passover meal for what we call Maundy Thursday. Peter is the one appointed to rally the disciples after Jesus’ arrest. (Luke 22:31-32) According to Luke (and Paul), Jesus appears first to Peter after the resurrection. (Luke 24:34; I Corinthians 15:5) Peter is the one charged with ministering to all the followers after the resurrection: “*Feed my sheep.*” (John 21:15-19)

Peter is the first one to recognize and declare Jesus’ true identity. We shall return to that scene in a minute. Peter is the rock upon which Christ will build His church. It is twice recorded that Jesus Himself stopped attempts on the part of James and John to take over Peter’s place as chief apostle. (Mark 10:35-37; Matthew 20:20-21)

Peter is the preeminent disciple. Jesus knew it. Peter knew it. The disciples knew it. The early church knew it. You knew it. And now I know it.

Phase Two is a lot of hard work. Sometimes we forget that the Gospels only recount a few of the most memorable moments of Jesus' ministry. What do you think Peter is doing for most of the rest of those three years? "From now on, you will be catching people," Jesus had told him. The crowds keep getting bigger and the opposition keeps mounting, and you know Peter is right in the middle of it. He is chief apostle because he does not back away from it. And maybe we do not know all the details, but we know enough about life to have some understanding of how it must have been. People who could not reach or persuade Jesus would try to get to Peter. You go to bed every night thinking of all the things you did not get done, how you might have responded to this or that situation, or what you might have said differently to this or that person. And why did your temper flare again, when you promised yourself to keep it calm and under control? And when Jesus looked at you that time in the middle of the mayhem – was that dismay or disapproval, or was He maybe just saying, "How are you doing with all this?" Oh well, tomorrow is another day ... and here it comes now.

Like any genuine convert, Peter has a great desire to prove his worth to Jesus – to make Jesus glad that He has called him. After the first initial enthusiasm, Peter wants very much to succeed. Do not judge it as good or bad; it is just Phase Two. It does some good; it does some harm. It seems to be a phase we all have to pass through, if we get converted in the first place.

Perhaps we can best highlight the glory and the pathos of Phase Two by going to Peter's finest hour within this phase. It is the highest moment of the lowest level of the Christian pilgrimage. It is Peter's confession of faith: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

They are on holiday in Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Herman, way north of Herod's territory and also of their own area of ministry. They are on retreat. Jesus has asked a crucial question. Peter, as usual, is the only one with courage enough to dare an answer. We expect every novice Christian today to know the answer by heart, but the first time around was a different story. Jesus had never put it into words Himself. He usually referred to Himself as the "Son of Man" – enigmatic on purpose. It was not Jesus' way to push

His identity onto others. He went about His business and waited for people to discern the truth and come to their own conclusions. (A thing many of His followers seldom do.) But now, on retreat – in a quiet, unhurried moment as they talk together – Jesus asks His closest friends: How are you doing with all this? Is any of it registering? Are you okay with it? Who do you think I am really?

The answer on Peter's inside goes against everything he has been taught on the outside. It goes against everything he has grown up believing. "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.... You shall make no image of anything that is in heaven above, or on the earth beneath*" – for I am holy: different from anything you can know or imagine. In reverence, no good Jew would even speak the holy name – though in truth it was not a name, but only a hint at God's identity that God had given to Moses. But who then *is* this one who floods the nets with fish, calms storms, heals children, and reaches into your mind and fills your heart with hope and purpose like you never imagined possible before?

Peter must kick over his entire heritage to make the reply that wells up within him. It is shocking. It is blasphemy, and he could be killed for it. Eventually he *will* be killed for it. If he is wrong, Jesus Himself will be aghast and angry. Even brash, headstrong Peter must have swallowed hard before he said this thing which had never before been uttered on the face of the earth.

Better if we do not say it too lightly today either. Better if we say it with our hearts in our throats and with our temples pounding, like Peter had to. Only, the problem is, Peter *does* know who Jesus is! Oh, the exact wording is not the issue, but Peter has *bet his life* on Jesus – even more than he consciously knows. And there is more to life than Peter knows, but way inside, Peter has bet all of that on Jesus too. All of it. Frank Sinatra is not my favorite theologian, but he got this one right: "When somebody loves you, it's no good unless he loves you *all the way*." And that is true coming or going: it is true of the way Jesus loves us, and it is also true of the way we end up loving Him back.

In any case, Peter has done this – he has come this far. And he is glad he has done it and is willing to say so. "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

Jesus is delighted. Peter has moved from disciple to apostle – from learner to message-bearer. Peter knows, and he will bear witness

to what he knows. *“On this rock I will build my church.”* Jesus is delighted. It is exceedingly important to notice that Jesus is not outraged.

In our time, as in every time, there is much offense in Peter’s statement. We are told, on the one hand, that we should not voice such things because it sounds so exclusive and superior to the sincere beliefs of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Buddhists, and so forth. On the other hand, if the apostles had never learned to claim their faith, we would never have heard of Jesus. On yet another hand, Jesus Himself instructs His disciples in this very same passage not to tell anyone else His true identity. That might give us at least some concern to be discerning about to whom, when, and in what circumstances we give voice to our faith. On still another hand, we are part of a tradition that for two thousand years now would rather *die* than deny or keep quiet about Jesus.

Before we can finish contemplating it, a strange thing happens. In the very wake of the great confession, almost before the sounds of the words die out, a great rift is revealed between what Peter wants and what Jesus wants. It will plague them both mightily until Peter moves into the following phase (three). I suppose it’s nobody’s fault, really. Jesus sees what He sees, and He sees much too deeply and much too far into the future for Peter to follow Him easily. Jesus cannot be expected to betray His own vision and purpose. Peter cannot be expected to comprehend it, except on its most superficial levels. But as a result of the confession itself, and the fact that the rest of the twelve share Peter’s conviction once it has been voiced, Jesus is eager to move to a deeper level of understanding with His closest friends. It seems like this ought to be possible now that they are clear about His true identity. I read straight from the record: *“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. [They had not heard it all – grasped it all yet – had they?] And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’”* (Matthew 16:21-22)

It never ceases to amaze and dismay us that only a few minutes after Peter has declared Jesus to be the True King, the Messiah, the Anointed One – the High Prince of the Entire Universe – Peter also decides that he, Peter, is able and worthy to teach and instruct this same Jesus. How that makes me shudder within. But that is the

epitome of Phase Two at its worst: us telling Jesus what to do and how to do it; us trying to take over, to stay in control; us wanting to run things our own way. Oh yes, there is something terribly familiar about Peter.

And what is revealed is that Peter's confession of faith – no matter how appropriate, no matter how high it sounds – is only as big as his Phase Two perspective. When Peter says "You are the Christ," what he means is "You are the Christ according to my definition of what that means." Peter means: "You are the Christ who will lead us into prosperity, fame, and success." At this point, Peter cannot fathom any other concept of the role and function of the Messiah. Jesus' strange remarks threaten all of Peter's assumptions about his own future, the meaning of his faith, and the purpose of Jesus' life and mission. Jesus is trying to serve and obey God alone, but Peter is trying to ride Jesus' coattails into security, success, and victory in this world and in this life. In a nutshell, that is Phase Two Christianity, and we can still see it all around us today.

Does that make your hair stand on end just a little bit? It does mine. Peter knows the right answers, but he does not know the meaning or significance of his right answers. He is not kidding about giving his loyalty or his life to Jesus in the hard days ahead. He knows that the Kingdom is coming and that, in the process of coming, there will be quite a battle. He has even felt it gathering all around him for months now. He has no intention of shirking his responsibilities. He is not even discounting the possibility that he himself may be a casualty in the coming conflict. Things happen. Peter knows that. But for the Messiah Himself to be killed: unthinkable – preposterous! On top of that, there is Peter's own personal love and affection for Jesus. "Somebody is going to try to kill you, Lord? Not on my watch! Not while I'm around!" No wonder we love Peter. But do we also love Jesus?

There is a dimension to Jesus – and to the Kingdom and to the battle – that Peter in no way comprehends. Not yet. And it's no wonder. The Kingdom is not of this world, and neither is Jesus, and neither is the battle. Strangest of all, neither is Peter. And neither are we. But how fully do we know and remember this?

So Peter has come a long way. His life is devoted and committed. He knows the right answers. Only, Peter means them in the context of this world only, and therefore the answers – for all their enthusiasm

and faith and loyalty – are entirely inadequate. Jesus puts it quite a bit stronger: “*Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.*”

That must have cut Peter to the quick. It sure does when Jesus says that to me. Peter feels the pain of the rebuke, but he cannot fathom its depth or understand where it is coming from. It stares at him from out on the edge of his consciousness like some dark burden of unknown weight and magnitude. It belongs to him, but he does not know how to lift it yet. He will not know what it is about until the day of the rooster’s cry. And so this terrible remark is not the end of Phase Two, but it is *the beginning* of the end of Phase Two – because Phase Two cannot long endure this remark; it is too devastating.

Why is Jesus being so cruel? He loves Peter. So why does He nearly bite his head off? Because Peter has hit on the weakest place in Jesus’ armor. What Jesus desperately needs and wants are some friends who care about Him, who do not want Him to have to go through the ordeal He is heading into, who love Him and think this is not right, who know this should not be necessary. Jesus wants to be wrong – wants so badly to find a loophole in what His prayers are making increasingly clear. Therefore He cannot stand to listen to what Peter is saying. He must not entertain this loving and caring response from Peter, even for a moment – not if He wants to stay faithful to God. “*Get thee behind me, Satan!*”

What about our similarity to Peter? We do not always make first-chair like Peter did, but we try to be effective. Our most conscientious efforts for earthly success come out of and because of our first conversion. It really is not selfishness alone that makes us want to succeed. We want to succeed for the Lord. We want to do our part. We want the Lord to be proud of us, and we want Him to know how much we love Him and want to serve Him. What else can we do but try to succeed at something that seems worthwhile? And usually we do find a measure of success in one place or another, in one way or another. Maybe not enough, but enough to comfort ourselves that our faith is sincere. What then?

Well, look at the pattern: conversion; change; growth; moving up; responsibilities; leadership. What comes next? Crisis!

At first we do not believe that the crisis is directly ours. We do not deserve it. It was a mistake, or it was somebody else’s fault, or we just happened to be there. But the crisis is about the company or the

church or the organization or the family or whatever it is we are trying to succeed with. Besides, we live in a broken world; it is not our doing. So we think it is merely a time to give our all, to go for broke, to save the situation. (We will fight in the valleys, we will fight in the hills; we will never shirk our duty; we will never give in.) And mostly we think the situation will be saved, with God's help. It will turn out okay and we will be sitting pretty again – vindicated, secure, honored, maybe even loved. That is how it looks to Peter, until Phase Two is shattered and he finds himself in Phase Three.

Last week we left Peter as a happy new convert, filled with an initial enthusiasm – optimistic, success-oriented, still completely immersed in the things of this world. For the most part, that has not changed in Phase Two. Only, now Peter knows a lot more. He has more experience and know-how, a lot more knowledge, a clearer awareness of who Jesus really is. And he is a lot more effective and a lot more important to Jesus' ministry. We must not minimize this or think that Jesus is ungrateful for it. Peter has become first among the twelve, and his big concern is for the success of Jesus' New Movement.

But there is one more thing now. Peter has that terrible rebuke gnawing at his insides: *“Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”* That is a very hard thing to hear indeed if you have become a chief apostle.

Do you ever wonder about “the hindrance to Jesus” of Phase Two Christianity in our own day? It is enough to make one weep. It made Peter weep, when he finally understood. He wept until his heart and his soul and his will were broken. Oh yes, that is an essential part of our Path too. Only, we do not understand until we hear the rooster's cry. That is when we realize that “you cannot get there from here.” *“You must be born anew.”*

Please do not get the impression that I am looking down on Peter or thinking he was slow-witted or anything of the sort. If Peter had not tried like he did, he never would have become the right arm and the rock that Jesus needed. Phase Two is an essential part of the Pilgrim's Way, and there does not seem to be any way for any of us to skip or duck it. Peter was doing everything humanly possible. We can surely admire and respect him for that. Only, Peter got himself mixed up with a Savior who plays for keeps, in a world that really needs saving. When that happens, “everything humanly possible” is not nearly enough.

Everywhere around us, we are being told that this is not true. We are being told that *we* can do it – that we can band together and save our world; that if we are sincere and eager to help as many people as we can, God will help us to make it happen. Most of our world does not even realize that this is the essence of Phase Two. In Phase Two we have not yet put Jesus in charge. We think we are following Him, but it is still according to our own ideas and plans, our desires to do good, our hopes to make a better world. The conversion – the calling, the love, the obedience – has to get much deeper than that. The New Covenant is not like – not the same as – the Old Covenant. When we come up out of the waters of baptism, we are not like – not the same as – who we were before we were raised to New Life. Jesus is more powerful, more profound, and a far greater Messiah than our world has ever realized, even still. That means our spiritual warfare is not over. Even so, it is still the GOOD NEWS – and still the best news we have ever heard.