

"SIMON PETER'S STORY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
March 28, 1993

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### INTRODUCTION

There are two popular pictures of Simon Peter in our culture. One is the little cartoon character who stands at the gate of heaven with the key to the Kingdom. That image comes, of course, from those words of Jesus to Peter,

"You are the rock and upon this rock, I will build My church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven..."

That's one image we have of Simon Peter...standing at the gate of the Kingdom of heaven.

The other image of Simon Peter is more familiar to most of us. That's the image of Simon Peter as a crude, rough, blustery fisherman...vulgar, impetuous and unthinking. That's the other, almost opposite view of Simon Peter that is prevalent in our culture.

### DEVELOPMENT

But today I want to show you a different Simon Peter. I want you to see an intelligent, sensitive young man who wants more than anything else in the world to follow this Man from Nazareth. He is one of the important characters in the events of Holy Week which we now approach.

You're probably familiar with the story of how Simon Peter became a disciple. His brother, Andrew, brought him to Jesus in something of a First Century "Each One Bring One" occasion. Until this time, they were fishermen. Jesus told them He would make them "fishers" of men.

Within a short period of time, Simon Peter became the most prominent of all the disciples. Jesus had a small inner circle of disciples. There were the "12" of course, but there were three among those twelve who were particularly close to Him. They were present at every major incident in His ministry. One of these was Simon Peter; the others were James and John - the sons of Zebedee.

Remember these three were there on the Mount of Transfiguration where they beheld Christ in all His glory in the company of Moses and Elijah. It was Peter who said, "Lord...let us build three booths and stay here on this mountain".

And when Jesus raised a little girl from the dead, Peter, James and John were there. And it was Peter, whose mother-in-law was healed by Jesus. We know from this that Simon Peter was married. Some cynic once said that this was one miracle that Simon Peter probably viewed with mixed emotion. But every significant miracle that Jesus did, Simon Peter was close at hand!

And there was that time when Peter and the other disciples were out in the boat fishing all night and had not caught anything. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus came to them and said, "Cast your nets on the other side". They had been fishing all night and they were professional fishermen. They hadn't caught a thing...what difference was it going to make to cast the nets on the other side of the boat. It was Simon Peter who spoke up and said,

"Lord...we have fished all night...caught nothing, but at Your word, though, we'll cast our nets on the other side".

did its business. Without his leadership, the way would have been difficult for that early group of believers.

CLOSING LEGEND AND WORDS

There's an old legend that I'd like to leave with you. According to this legend, when Jesus was crucified and later ascended to be with the Father after His resurrection, the first being He encountered in heaven was the angel, Gabriel. Gabriel asked Christ, "Well...Jesus and how did it all go down there on earth?" And Jesus said to Gabriel, "Well, just about like we thought it would go. I was born and I lived among the people. I taught and healed but they ended up rejecting Me. I was crucified on their cross for the sins of the world and on the third day the Father raised Me and I've returned now to heaven".

Gabriel said, "Well, Lord...you weren't there very long were you...to accomplish your purpose. What is Your plan now?" And Jesus said, "Gabriel, my plan is Simon Peter." To which Gabriel said, "That fickle guy...why you just said that he denied You when you needed him the most. He's our plan? What's Plan B?" And Jesus said, "Simon Peter is my plan. There is NO plan B!"

There's a reason I shared this little legend. It's this. There are some people in this church...in all churches...who remind me of Simon Peter...people who love Christ, their church and more than anything else in the world want to know what Christ expects of them. You'll find them singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, visiting newcomers and doing all the jobs around a church without which the church could not begin to be the church. They give a large share of the church's budget even though they do not make up a large share of the membership. They are the "rocks" on which the church is based and built.

That's the plan. There is no plan B. It's those of you who love Christ and are seeking to serve Him in some way and who are willing to go that extra mile to find and feed Christ's other sheep. That's how Christ is saving this world. I give thanks for Simon Peter's story, for it has a message that always speaks to me as we come to our High Holy days. But I give thanks even more for the Simon Peters in our church - in any church - who are seeking to be faithful, seeking to love the Lord and to love their neighbors for Christ's sake. I hope his story is helpful to you as you, too, grow and mature "in Christ".

PRAYER

For the life and legacy of Your servant, Peter, we thank You, O God. And for all the Simon Peters of the centuries and even of the present who try to follow You, we give You our thanks. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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"Lord...we have fished all night...caught nothing, but at Your word, though, we'll cast our nets on the other side".

In other words...if You say it...we'll do it because we know You're someone special. They put their nets on the other side and caught so many fish they nearly sank their boat.

It was Simon Peter who tried to walk to Jesus on the water. It has to be one of the most hilarious scenes in the Scriptures. Jesus came out to His disciples' boat...walking on the water. Simon Peter decides to get out of the boat and walk to meet Him. He takes a couple of steps and like the cartoon character, he starts to sink. He has to yell out, "Lord, save me" And Jesus did!

And it was Simon Peter who always seemed to ask Jesus those tough questions. For example, one day Jesus was talking about forgiveness. It was Simon Peter who asked Jesus, "Lord...how many times must I forgive my brother? Seven times?" The Scribes and the Pharisees were teaching that you must forgive your brother three times if he offends you. Simon Peter sensed that Jesus expected more out of His disciples than the Scribes and Pharisees. "How many times, Lord...must I forgive my brother - seven times?" And Jesus answers Peter with the word, "Seventy times seven". There is no limit on the forgiveness that God has shown to us, and there is no limit on the forgiveness that we should show to others.

When Jesus spoke of the "blind leading the blind", it was Simon Peter who took Jesus to one side and asked Him to explain what He meant. "What do you mean, Lord...the blind leading the blind". He was always asking questions because He really longed to know what it was that Jesus expected out of him.

#### PETER GROWS

And so throughout the Gospel narrative we watch Simon Peter, this young, impetuous, but deeply sincere man grow and blossom in his discipleship until we come to that wonderful scene at Caesarea Philippi where Jesus took His disciples aside and asked them, "And who do people say that I am?" And Peter hits the nail on the head with his answer, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". And this was a tremendous and important event in the Gospels, for it marks a distinct change in the relationship that Jesus has with His disciples.

Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ", and then Jesus turns to Simon Peter and pays him just about the highest compliment recorded in the New Testament.

"You are the rock, and upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and I will give you - Simon Peter - the keys to heaven"

Simon Peter probably glowed all over when Jesus paid him this kind compliment and it was the high point in the life of Simon Peter. It will be for some time, because from here Simon Peter begins a downward slide. Isn't it so true... that the most valuable lessons in life always seem to come the hard way? I think that's the way it is with most people....it's nice when things are going smoothly, and everything is getting better and better. That was the way things were going with Simon Peter, but really - we don't start to grow spiritually until we are tested. And there were some tests awaiting Simon Peter and it seems that the testing began almost immediately after Jesus had paid him this high compliment.

"You are the rock, and upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and I will give you the keys to heaven...."

THE STORY CONTINUES

The story continues as Jesus begins to tell His disciples that He must suffer and die. Simon Peter, at this point in the story, takes Jesus aside and gives Him some advice. "Now Master...don't you talk like that!...You'll get us all discouraged". Don't you love it? Perhaps Simon Peter was one of the original "positive thinkers". Anyway, he felt that all this talk about crucifixion and dying was just a bit on the negative side and it wasn't good political strategy in his view...too heavy.

At this point, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and unleashed some of the harshest words that He probably ever used on anybody. Remember them?

"Get thee behind Me, Satan...you are not on the side of God, but on the side of man".

Now...this is a pretty rapid fall from grace, it seems to me. One moment Simon Peter was the rock upon which Christ would build His church and the next moment he was Satan. Simon Peter's season of hard growth had just begun.

Come with me now to the Last Supper. Jesus had gathered there in the Upper Room His twelve disciples. Removing His garments and girding Himself with a towel, He took a bowl and began washing the feet of the disciples. When He comes to Peter, though, Simon Peter couldn't resist giving Him some advice. He said, "Lord...you can't wash my feet". We can appreciate Simon Peter's humility. After all the Lord of Lords was preparing to wash his feet. That just could not be in Peter's book. Jesus probably smiled sympathetically as He said to him,

"If I don't wash your feet, Simon, you can't share with Me in the Kingdom" And Simon Peter answered saying, "Lord...don't just wash my feet...wash my hands and my head. Wash me all over."

There's something here about Simon Peter's attitude that touches us. And then after supper Jesus told His disciples that one of them would betray Him. It was Simon Peter who spoke up again, "Not me, Lord. All the rest may leave you, but I'll never leave you". Jesus turned to Simon Peter, probably with love and understanding in His dark eyes and said, "Simon...before the cock crows tomorrow morning, you will deny Me three times."

And the next scene is the Garden where Jesus went to pray. With Him were the three disciples, Peter, James and John. Jesus goes ahead, leaving them behind...His closest friends. He goes further into the Garden to pray, "Father, if possible...let this cup pass from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but yours...." And the sweat dripped from His body like great drops of blood and then an hour or so later He returns to where He had left the three disciples and remember what they were doing? They had fallen asleep. Jesus scolds Simon Peter, saying to him, "Couldn't you stay awake for one hour?"

While they were in the garden a legion of Roman soldiers arrives led by Judas to arrest Jesus. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss and Simon Peter draws his sword and tries to defend Jesus all by himself and in this wild show of loyalty and courage he cuts off the ear of the High Priest's servant. He still fails to understand Christ's plan, but Christ needs no defense no matter how noble the motivation.

They take Jesus away. Peter stands there watching...wondering...

And the disciples all begin to scatter like sheep without a shepherd, save one - Simon Peter. Carefully hidden by the shadows of the night, he follows the soldiers as they take Jesus to be tried, scourged and ultimately crucified. He was not the bold witness he had vowed he would be, but at least...at least, we have to admit this...he was there - nearby.

There are only two places in the Scripture where a charcoal fire is mentioned. One of them is outside the palace where he was warming himself that night while Jesus was put on trial. Remember the scene. A servant girl recognized him, "You're one of the disciples...one of His disciples, aren't you?" Startled, Simon Peter answers, "I've never heard of the man". But then somebody else speaks up, "I recognize your accent...you're a Galilean. You're one of the disciples". Again, Simon Peter declares, "No, I never knew the man". Another man would not let the controversy go..."I saw you with him" he says. Simon Peter lets out a curse and says, "I never knew the man". And then at that moment, he heard the cock crow and he remembers the words of Jesus and his heart begins to break. He went out and wept with great hurt and disappointment in his own weak human resolve. It appears to be all over...back to fishing he would go.

NOT THE END

Of course, that's not the end of the story. The women went to the grave of Jesus on the third day. The stone was rolled away and they saw a stranger dressed in white. The stranger said to

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here for He has risen"

And the angel spoke the two most beautiful words in all the Scriptures, "Go and tell His disciples and PETER...that He will meet them in Galilee". One wonders why was Simon Peter singled out? To me, it's almost as if Christ was saying to him,

"You let me down, BUT I'm still counting on you. You are still the ROCK upon which I will build My Church."

After His resurrection Christ appeared to His disciples several times...the third time beside the Sea of Galilee. They had breakfast together around a charcoal fire (the second time a charcoal fire is mentioned in Scripture). Simon Peter is sitting next to Jesus. Remember the scene and the dialogue?

Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked, "Simon, do you love Me?" And Simon answered, "Yes, Lord...You know that I love You". Jesus said, "Tend My lambs". A second time He turned to him and said, "Simon, Son of John, do you love Me?" And Simon answered, "Lord...You know that I do". Jesus said, "Feed My sheep" And a third time, Jesus turned to him and said, "Simon, Son of John...do you love Me?" Simon was hurt that Jesus would ask him a third time. He answered with deep emotion, "Lord...You know everything. You know that I love You". Jesus said, "Feed My sheep". Three denials. Three questions. Three directives.

That was all. But I think that what Jesus wanted Simon Peter to see was simply this: if Simon Peter was really going to be His disciple, His man, His rock...then Simon Peter had to take one more step in his discipleship...to feed Christ's other sheep.

Simon Peter did become the rock of the church. Paul was the great missionary to the Gentiles, but it was Simon Peter at the church in Jerusalem who was the rock for the early church. Whenever they had to make an important decision, it was Simon Peter whom they called on. He was the rock upon which the early church



did its business. Without his leadership, the way would have been difficult for that early group of believers. Legend has it that he died in Rome..witnessing...

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There's an old legend that I'd like to leave with you. According to this legend, when Jesus was crucified and later ascended to be with the Father after His resurrection, the first being He encountered in heaven was the angel, Gabriel. Gabriel asked Christ, "Well...Jesus and how did it all go down there on earth?" And Jesus said to Gabriel, "Well, just about like we thought it would go. I was born and I lived among the people. I taught and healed but they ended up rejecting Me. I was crucified on their cross for the sins of the world and on the third day the Father raised Me and I've returned now to heaven".

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PRAYER

For the life and legacy of Your servant, Peter, we thank You, O God. And for all the Simon Peters of the centuries and even of the present who try to follow You, we give You our thanks. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:      March 28, 1993

WE ARE GRATEFUL, O GOD, for these quiet moments of life when we can draw closer to YOU and for a few moments see life from higher ground.

TAKE US into YOUR inner sanctum.  
MAKE THIS truly a holy hour for each of us.  
MAY we feel and experience something here today that will make a difference in us and in our outlook on life.

IN THESE MOMENTS, we ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving, and we realize that we bring so little of ourselves to YOU.

YOU have called us to be your disciples, and yet some of us could hardly be recognized as such.

YOU have called us to follow YOU, and yet so often we follow from afar off....where it is safe, hesitating to take a stand and declare our convictions.

YOU have called us to love one another, but hatred, illwill, suspicion, jealousy have well nigh wrecked our world.

YOU have called us to Love YOU, but our love is cold, indifferent, uncertain.

FORGIVE US, LORD and cleanse us from our sins, our shortcomings, our selfish ways. Forgive us that we talk so much and think so little; forgive us that we pray so little and worry so much.

STRENGTHEN within each of us that determination to root out unChristian thoughts and attitudes. Look with compassion upon all who with inner turmoil and conflict turn to You.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that desperately needs to hear His word and follow His way.

For our brothers and sisters in need, we pray.

This we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 28, 1993

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning. And we hope we shall have opportunity....be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card, or....come, worship with us....come, work with us....
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil....doing the Lord's work here at this busy....since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ, and it is in His loving spirit....
- C. Coffee hour today is "in honor" of our new friends of recent months...come down and get to know us better....catch some thing of the spirit of this parish. Some of you may be here because of a special invitation from a member of this church to join us....we hope we get to meet you.
- D. Members: wear your name tag. Remember the day you first come down for coffee and some one went out of their way to greet you, helped to make you feel at home...pass it on to some

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are listed for you in the bulletin...quite a few...review them on your own noting Holy Week, Palm Sunday and Easter announcements. Remember, too, that today at one o'clock we shall be holding the annual meeting of the United Methodist Women...third floor Fellowship Hall...to vote on the church fair allocations....both men and women are invited. Jane Chaney will be presiding...come and share in the excitement of giving money away to church and community concerns.

III. TODAY'S SERMON / A BRIEF WORD....

- A. I have always had a fondness for Biblical personalities and for sermons that deal with those "heroes" of our faith...and today's sermon brings Simon Peter before us...one of the main characters in the Holy Week drama...and hopefully lessons from his life...his life's story will spill over and touch our lives. There is much there for us.

IV. OFFERING

- A. Before we proceed to the morning offering, let me offer words of thanks for your response to the special Endowment appeal and

also to the One Great Hour of Sharing appeal...which is being celebrated in our churches these last two Sundays of March....hopefully if you have not yet already responded, you will want to do so today....envelope is in the bulletin....

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"  
In this spirit, let us...