

"THE ST. PETER PRINCIPLE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

The Peter Principle was a book written several years ago by Laurence Peter about how organizations operate. According to the Peter Principle, people are promoted in organizations to the level of their incompetence. It was a very popular thesis, especially among those who are always ready to believe that those above them in the organization are of meager talent. Written as a satire, it was true enough to hit home and make us laugh.

Peter, incidently, has written a new book entitled, Why Things Go Wrong, in which he provides even more examples of the Peter Principle. For instance, he cites public laws that illustrate the Peter Principle. In Danville, Pennsylvania, there's a law that says, "All fire hydrants must be checked an hour before a fire". In Seattle, there's a law that says, "It's unlawful to carry a concealed weapon that is more than six feet in length". It's not only unlawful, it's somewhat difficult. His thesis is that incompetence is still in full flower. The French author Flaubert once said,

"Stupidity didn't give way to science and technology, it just progressed right along with science and technology".

DEVELOPMENT

What these theories tell us is that there is an innate imperfection in human nature. We can't get rid of it. No matter how high we climb in life, we take the same human nature along with us. We have the ability to learn from old mistakes - that's true - but we don't have the ability to avoid making new mistakes.

And one thing I like about the Bible is its realism about that. The Bible is populated with people who have to live with their accumulated past mistakes. Isaiah in the Temple is confronted by a vision of God, and cries out, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips". That's not morbid self-deprecation, that's honesty about the human condition. And it says that when we measure ourselves against the highest that we know, when we stand before God, we must confess, "I am not worthy".

The Bible is filled with people like Isaiah. They're real people. We recognize them. They're not plaster saints, but they are people who are completely honest about their human condition. One of my favorites is Peter, whose portrait is drawn more fully and more honestly than anyone else in the New Testament. That portrait begins here in the fifth chapter of Luke where Jesus calls him to be His disciple.

PETER'S PORTRAIT

Now, if anyone was an example of the "Peter Principle", it was Saint Peter. He rises quickly in the organization, becomes the CO, and he takes his incompetence with him, all the way up to the top. It's amazing the way they tell the story of Peter because the temptation certainly must have been to re-write the story, doctor it, edit it to get out those embarrassing incidents in his life, the way biographers write stories of national heroes so as to put them in the best possible light. That must have been a temptation, but the New Testament doesn't do that. It shows Peter bungling his way right up to the top.

I think it's difficult for us to fully appreciate what Peter meant to the Church back there in the First Century. The Lord, Himself, appointed Peter to be the leader of the Church. He said to him, "You are Peter, Petros, the rock". Remember, his name was Simon before this. Jesus gave him his name, "The Rock". "And on you I will build the Church". And when Peter assumed his position as chief Apostle after the Resurrection, after Pentecost, the Church venerated him because he was the representative of Christ. He was the nearest they could get to being with Christ.

We know nothing like that in our experience. We have to imagine what it was like to be in that First Century Church. If you were, you didn't meet in a beautiful sanctuary like this...you met in somebody's home, secretly...because it was against the Law to be a Christian. And the word comes to that little community of which you are a part that Peter, himself, is going to come to visit and share some stories about the Lord. Can you imagine what that would mean to that little Church. It would mean that you could now get as close to Christ as you could ever possibly get.

Then he'd come and he'd tell his stories about his life with the Lord, those stories that you and I read in the Gospel. They are stories in which he never quite gets it right. He's a bumbling, sinful, human being, just like the rest of us, whose power is not in his perfection, but in his humility. God used him, not because he was without sin, but because he could confess his sin.

I'm sure they must have asked him, "Peter....tell us about the first time you saw the Lord". And he told them this story. "I was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee and we had had a terrible day...no luck at all. Finally we rode back to the shore, skunked. As we were washing our nets at the shore, I saw Him come toward us, surrounded by a crowd. They were trying to get at Him, pushing in towards Him. He got into my boat and said, "Pull out from the shore". And I did....about 25 feet. He stood there in the boat and preached to the crowd. When He finished He turned to me and said, 'Now put out into the deep and I'll show you where the fish are'. And you can imagine how a fisherman feels about someone coming up and telling him where the fish are, but I did it. We went in the direction that He pointed and then put down our nets, then tried to pull them up and we couldn't do it because they were so heavy. We had to call another boat to come over to help us. And the fish that filled that net were so many that it filled both of the boats."

"I fell to my knees and said, 'Depart from me for I am a sinful man'. For I knew, like old Isaiah in the Temple, that I was in the presence of God. And do you know what He did? He did the same thing that God did to Isaiah. He called me to a great mission. He said that He wanted to use me, even me. And to this day, I don't know why we did it, for I was then - and am now - unworthy. But when we got back to the shore, I left my nets and I followed Him."

Now that story, or something like it is what Peter told wherever he went. The Church remembered it, and wrote it down, and that's why we have it today. They remembered it because they said, "Everybody should hear this". Everybody, so that we would know that the Good News is not about what we can do, but about what God can do with us. It's not about our perfection, or about our power, or about the virtue of our lives. It's about God's grace.

THE ST. PETER PRINCIPLE

is overcome by grace.

That's what I'd like to call, the "St. Peter Principle". Incompetence, honestly confessed,

Now I don't know about you, but I identify with Peter because he demonstrates that sincerity and good intentions don't always result in success. There was nobody with better intentions than Peter, nobody more sincere than Peter. Big, teddy bear of a man, wanting always to do the right thing, and so often falling on his face. It was as if there were a struggle in him between the good side of him and the bad side of him, and the good side did not always win. "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want is what I end up doing". It was not Peter who wrote that, it was St. Paul. But, Peter could have said it - and so, too, could you or I.

Remember the time that Peter walked on water, or tried to walk on the ater and sank like a rock. He told that story on himself, too, and he probably told it with the pun about his name. "I sank like a rock". And the meaning of it was,

"I can preach a good sermon about faith, about how if you walk into the storms of life with your eye on Jesus you're not going to sink. But when it comes to practicing it, when you're called to step out of the safety of the boat and trust the promises of Jesus, now that's a different matter entirely."

And he told them about the end, the story about how Jesus predicted that He was going to be arrested and crucified. And Peter told Him, "I'll stay with you till the end". And he could have told that story to say that he did. Nobody would have questioned it. But he didn't tell it that way. He could even have told it saying, "At least I stayed with Him longer than anybody else". But he didn't tell it that way either. He told it honestly.

"Three times I was asked if I was a follower of Jesus and three times I said, 'NO'. I wanted to do the right thing, but...when the moment of truth came, I couldn't do it."

Now, why would Peter tell all of those stories, and why would the Church remember them? There's only one reason. Because Peter knew what God had done through him was not because of any virtue, or perfection, or power on his part, but by grace alone. That's the "St. Peter Principle". Our incompetence, even our sinfulness, honestly confessed is overcome by grace. It's as if our problem in life, in this life, is not incompetence, but our efforts to conceal it.

ITS MEANING FOR US

Let's consider its meaning for us. I came across the description of a self-sufficient man, proud of his independence, and self-sufficiency, dressed immaculately. He always loved to walk through the park on a Sunday afternoon so that he could be seen, his cane swinging through the air, a feeling of superiority over his life, thinking how wonderful it was that he had been so successful so easily in this life. And at precisely that moment, he trips on a rock and sprawls on the path. He gets up, dusts his clothes, looks around anxiously to see if anybody saw him. And then he assumed his strutting promenade.

Now there's something of that sort of behavior in all of us. We often hide our humanness, fearful that somebody may see us trip up, slip-up, make a fool of ourselves. We may feel that if anybody ever really knows us for what we are that we'll end up losing our power and our appeal. We need to be mindful of the paradox of grace. It goes like this: when we confess our weakness we become strong. That paradox explains what happened in Peter's life. It explains why Peter had so much power when he was so human.

Peter came to see that faith means trusting God. For him, faith meant trusting that God had really forgiven him...he really has. So, you don't have to pretend. You can be honest about who you are. You can trust that you can step out of the security of the boat, or you can come out from behind the defenses you have built up around your life, and you will not sink. Because God is on your side. His grace means that it is not all up to you to achieve happiness in this life. You can be imperfect and still be able to experience it. That's the "St. Peter Principle". Our limitations, our sins are overcome by grace. We can't do everything. We certainly can't do everything well, but we can do our best. And grace means that somehow, that's enough. "Amazing grace". Yes, how sweet it sounds.

I don't fully understand that, but I have experienced it. If we are faithful at doing our best, then there is something that happens that overcomes our limitations. That's why I trust that as a preacher that God can take the words of this slow-thinking, slow-talking, mumbling preacher who didn't enjoy speech class and never did well in it, and use those words to do something for someone else "by grace". That's why I trust that as a parent that what I have said, or what I failed to say, will be overcome "by the grace" that allows them to hear what I meant to say. That's why as a human being, I trust that my mistakes in the past will not detract from my life in the future, but "by grace" they will be overcome. In fact, "by grace" they can become the means of appreciating life all the more!

Dame Edith Sitwell said of William Blake, the painter and poet, "Of course he was cracked". "That's where the light shone through". We're all cracked somewhere, all of us. None of us is perfect. And it is by grace that that flaw does not ruin our life. And it's by grace that sometimes that flaw becomes the source of all our power. So that when the "saints come marching in" to the Kingdom, they will be a motley crew. Not one of them will be perfect. It will be something to see, all of them with pasts...filled with problems and mistakes, handicaps, limitations, sins...and what have you. And God used every one of mightily.

You and I can learn from all of this. It's called the "St. Peter Principle". Peter will be first in that number, incidentally. He was the first chosen to be in that number, chosen first by our Lord as the First Disciple. He is the prototype of all that follow. They are all just like him. They had to overcome problems, and some of them never overcame them. But they discovered grace. At some point they all knelt down and said, "I am not worthy". And from that moment on, the fact that they were not perfect didn't matter. Grace overcame their incompetence.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

The other day I read an interview with Mary Tyler Moore. She's had an amazing career. She's had a

successful television series in each of the last three decades. She may not use the language that we have used in this sermon, but she experienced something of the reality that we've been trying to point to in this sermon. She said,

"I'm tough on myself sometimes. There's a part of me that beats me up, that says, 'Hey, come on! You're not smart enough. You're not out-going enough. You're not pretty enough. You're not young enough. And you're not this, and you're not that. And you're not the other thing. But I guess I'm getting away from that more and more. I guess what I'm beginning to sense in myself is that at least I'm trying."

And later on in the interview, she was asked if she finds it a burden to be a role model for women in our time. And she answered,

"No....had I been playing a perfect woman I would find it too much responsibility and a burden. But I don't. I am an imperfect human being, and I'm proud of it. I am not ashamed to admit that I have weaknesses and problems and that I have made mistakes, and that I have sought help".

Peter one day long ago confronted by our Lord, Jesus, said, "But I'm unworthy". Jesus said to Peter, "Now I can use you. Follow Me."

PRAYER Our lives are not easy, O God, and at times we fall short and fail to be our best. Remind us at such times of the example of Peter and of how Your grace at work in his life, put him on his feet, made him strong and useful in His for You. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: February 22, 1987

GRATEFUL WE ARE, O GOD, for the quiet moments of life...when we can draw close to You and for a few moments, at least, step aside from the tension and turmoil of life in this great city...and here see life from "higher ground"...and here remember that "all things are possible to him who believes."

TAKE US, LORD, into your inner sanctum. Make this truly a holy hour for each of us. May we feel your warmth, your presence, your nearness as we quietly sit here. May we feel something this hour that will truly 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's safe, hesitating to take a stand, to declare our convictions, to let others know to whom we give our allegiance and loyalty.

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

YOU have called us to love you, but our love is cold, calculating, indifferent. Fear and panic paralyze our spirits.

HERE ON THIS SUNDAY AS WE AGAIN APPROACH ASH WEDNESDAY, forgive us our sins.

Cleanse us. Cleanse us of our sins, our shortcomings, our narrow, rigid, selfish ways.

Forgive us for those things we did which deep in our hearts we know we should not have done. Forgive us for failing to do the things we should have done. Forgive us that we talk so much and think so little...that we pray so little and worry so much. Help us to trust ourselves completely to Your healing presence.

NOW STRENGTHEN within each one of us the determination to root out un-Christ-like attitudes and feelings.

Confirm within us the decisions and certainties of this hour. We do believe in You, Lord; help our unbelief.

Make us resolute, loyal, determined followers of Christ. Send us out of here with peace and power at the core of our being, ready for an adventure with Christ. In His name and in His spirit, we pray.

INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand.

May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life and may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding presence. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, saith your God. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: we are forgiven."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing... you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole"

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to You on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

Charles Oldham, father of Karen.
Ruth Frame
- Milton Dostis, friend of our Church.

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, February 22, 1987

GREETING I'd like to welcome the boys and girls of our Sunday School who have joined us down here - in the front - for a few moments before heading off to their class sessions elsewhere in our church building. Boys and girls, it's good to see you all again.

What a good time we had two weeks ago today at Mrs. Schroedel's "Penny Rolling Party". We rolled a lot of pennies that Sunday. I hope to be able to tell you next Sunday how many pennies we rolled that day.

Next Sunday is our Anniversary service - the day we are celebrating as our church birthday. We'll be 150 years old. That's old, isn't it!

TODAY Today we're celebrating a birthday. Any ideas whose birthday today is? And don't tell me it's Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

Today is George Washington's birthday and see you all down here in the front of our Church reminds me of something I once read about George Washington. As you know, he was a very busy man...a great leader of our country in its early years - a GENERAL and later on our FIRST PRESIDENT.

He was a man of great integrity. They use to tell me when I was your age that Washington never told a lie. He always told the truth. That's so important.

He always tried to be in Church on a Sunday morning and he always made a point of sitting up front...straight and tall...in either the first or the second row...as you have this morning. He felt it was important that people know he was in Church. He wanted them to know how he felt about God, and the Church, and the Bible and the teachings of Jesus...that's why he chose to sit up front...straight and tall....so others would know he was there.

UP FRONT It was UP FRONT for George Washington....where the action was... where he could hear every word and participate fully in all that was going on. I think that's a good thing to remember about Washington, and I hope as you get older and make your own decisions that like George Washington, you will make a point of attending Church and when you come in here....sit down near the front...always try to be on time....and share in all that goes on.

HYMN NO. 156 Now we're going to sing a hymn that many of us use to sing when we were in Sunday School....it's number 156. "I Would be True". As I read through these words that call on us to be true, pure, strong and brave, I thought of Washington. Let's all stand and have a good sing as the boys and girls head out during the second verse.

Thanks for coming and we'll see you next Sunday!

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 22, 1987

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you worshipping with us...and hope that we may have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal...
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Take a moment... come, worship with us on other Sundays. Works with us in the programs of service in which we are involved.
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil of this part of NYC. We have been ministering here since 1837. Fourth building. We minister in the name and spirit of Christ, and it is in His name in His loving spirit...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to "pick up" your copy of our monthly news sheet. Your notes and articles and contributions for the March issue should be in today...
- B. You'll note that we are having a Bake Sale today as a part of the coffee hour. Proceeds help to undergird...
- C. This evening a Pot-Luck Supper and Hymn Sing. Details are in the bulletin. Be in touch with Lillian Kennedy or Ann Bryant regarding the supper. Stan Tucker will be at the piano for the hymn sing...
- D. Progressive Dinner. Saturday evening. Starts at Gregg Buttermore's. \$ 6.00.

III. NEXT SUNDAY

- A. Anniversary Sunday. Special service. Our Bishop, C. Dale White will be with us to bring the sermon. Share the word and plan to be with us.

IV. TWO SPECIAL STUDY OPPORTUNITIES

- A. Adult Bible Class on a Sunday morning. Some 18 people are meeting regularly. Janet Ernst, teacher. Anna Delson, assistant.

- B. "Hounds of Heaven". Tuesday evenings at 6:30 pm. Third Floor. Some of the members share in supper together at Drake's Drum, Second Avenue at 85th Street.

V. LENT BEGINS

- A. Ash Wednesday comes on March 4th. Holy Communion will be administered by me here in the sanctuary, 7:30 to 9:30 in the morning. 4:30 to 6:30 in the evening. Come into the sanctuary.
- B. The Lenten devotional, The Sanctuary, will be available next Sunday. A copy for each of you to use during Lent.

VI. OFFERING

- A. Special appeal. Human Relations Day. Envelopes in the narthex.
- B. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

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by

*Kathleen Perez, Membership Coordinator
Food for Survival Food Bank*

HUNGER AND THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' LETTER,
"ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL"

by

*The Reverend Joseph Dirr, S.J., Director
Jesuit Outreach Office, New York financial community*

CITIZEN ACTION ON HUNGER ISSUES

by

*Marlene Kiingati, Northeast Regional Coordinator
Bread for the World*

PRAYER SERVICE:

*The Reverend Gwen Buehrens, Assistant Pastor
The Church of the Holy Trinity*

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