

Restores My Life

Easter Season Series on Discipleship Week 2

John 21:15-19

May 12, 2019

On Friday we went upstate to see my mom for Mother's Day. On the way, we saw a lot of election signs as Pennsylvania gets ready for primary elections on May 21st. In Wysox Township, Bradford County, we saw signs for, I'm not kidding, a man named Bill Them. I assumed he was running for tax collector, but it turns out he's running for Wysox Township Supervisor.

Too bad. I always like it when names line up with people's professions. We have a retired bishop in the United Methodist Church named Larry Goodpaster. I wonder if he knew his whole life he was called to be a minister? Sometimes you hear about a chef whose last name is Cook, or an orthopedic surgeon whose last name is Limb. Psychologists call this "nominative determinism", the idea that your name would somehow correlate to your career. Apparently there are way more dentists named Dennis, statistically, than dentists with any other name. What do you think? Have you ever met someone whose name lines up with what they do and who they are?

I thought we would take a look at the name Peter today. I imagine when Peter was born, his parents took great care in naming him something that would suit him well. They chose the name Simon, the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Shim'on, which means, "he has heard." They raised their son in the faith. By the time Simon met Jesus, he was a fisherman by trade, but he had heard all about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had heard about the promised Messiah. When Simon first met Jesus, he had heard about Jesus from his brother Andrew. But he had not yet seen for himself. His name suited him well.

But at their first meeting, Jesus announced a name change. "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephus." Just like that, Jesus announced a change in this young man's identity. Simon would be called Cephas, which is Aramaic for rock. Translated into Greek, Cephas became Petros—not Petra, the rock, which is Jesus, but Petros, small rock or stone. The Greek word Petros became Peter in English. Simon "he has heard" son of John became "Cephas"—little rock, little brother and friend of Christ.

I imagine it took Simon Peter some time to get used to this new identity. Good thing he had three years of traveling with Jesus, witnessing miracles, hearing sermons, and growing in his discipleship. I hope he came to love his new name. "Cephas." Petros. Peter. Little stone. Little Christ. A name to be proud of! It was Peter alone who risked getting out of the boat and, for a time, walked on water! If that isn't a wow, I don't know what is. It was Peter who was with Jesus and two other disciples at the transfiguration, and saw Jesus

high and lifted up, full of God's glory because Jesus is God. It was Peter who was so empowered by all that he had seen and done, that he bragged that no matter what, he would never leave or forsake Jesus.

But then came that fateful night when Jesus was arrested. The disciples were petrified. They knew how drunk with power the Pharisees and Sadducees were. They knew the brutality of the Romans. They knew they were not safe! Flight or fight kicked in. Fighting would not work—even the best armies were no match for the Romans. So they took flight. They ran for their lives. Even Cephas, Petros, Peter. He forgot that he was Jesus' little rock, that he was called to be a little Christ, and he hid himself. He reverted back to being Simon, "he has heard". Standing around the fire, waiting for news about Jesus, he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Shame and cowardice hung like a heavy dark blanket over his soul.

But we know that it is always sunrise somewhere, and on the third day, Peter's world began to get brighter with the morning news of the Resurrection. That night he saw for himself the risen Christ, when Jesus appeared in the room with the disciples and said, "Peace be with you." A week later, Jesus appeared again, and this time Thomas was there to see it, too. Many scholars believe that should be the end of the gospel of John, and that chapter 21 was added by a later writer. All we know for sure is that we have this account from the 21st chapter of John, of Jesus appearing to the disciples sometime after the first two appearances. We started working with this story last week, reading about how the disciples had been fishing all night in the Sea of Tiberius, without catching anything. A man on the shore told them to cast their nets to the right side, and they immediately caught 153 large fish. We talked about how Peter didn't wait for the boat to get to shore, he enthusiastically jumped in the water, and swam to greet his Lord. We can imagine how bright the world must have seemed to Simon Peter while he ate the meal that Jesus himself provided.

But there's more to the story! Things get even better for Peter. He not only gets fed and cared for by Jesus—he gets commissioned to get back to work for Jesus. There's nothing wrong with being a fisherman. But Jesus has more for Peter to do than just fish for fish. He wants him to fish for people. Jesus wants Peter to feed his lambs and care for his flock. Again, he calls for a change in Simon Peter's identity. Jesus "reinstates" Peter. He isn't supposed to go back to being the fisherman, Shim'on "he has heard." He is to be Peter, little rock, little Christ, a shepherd of people. He is to go from being a person who has heard about God to becoming a person who tells about God, and even more, reveals God.

This is wonderful news for Peter, but again, I want to say, there's more to the story! Do you remember on Palm Sunday, how we talked about the Procession of the Lambs? Every year in Jerusalem, a few days before Passover, everyone would line up and watch as the shepherds drove the spring lambs down from the hills into the holy city. Every family would need to pick out a lamb to take home, and take care of it for three days. Then each family would appear before the priests with their lamb to get it slaughtered so they could celebrate the Passover seder. The priest would ask the head of the household, "Do you love your lamb? The head of the household had three tries to answer convincingly, and

show that they really did love their lamb. If they couldn't answer with enough enthusiasm, their sacrifice would not be accepted, and they would not be able to participate in the festival.

When Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me", we can imagine that Peter was thinking about that important ritual of the Jewish faith. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Peter, do you love your lamb? I think Jesus knew all along that he did love his lamb. But I think Jesus asked him three times so Peter would understand clearly, you are now head of this household. You are not just reinstated as a disciple, you are now a leader in this new family of faith I am building. By saying yes three times, Peter claimed the authority that Jesus was placing upon him, to be a leader and spiritual father figure. A few short weeks before all of this, Peter thought he was a failure for denying Jesus. Now he was being raised up as head of the household of faith.

This is what Jesus wants to do for every single one of us. At our baptisms, we were given a new identity. When received the family name "Christian". Little Christs. Jesus called himself the rock, so it is fair to say we are all little rocks, bedrocks if you will, on which the kingdom of God is built. We are all little rocks, building blocks if you will, by which the kingdom of God is built. We are all Peter: people who were given a name at birth by our parents, but who were given a different name by Jesus. You are Dorry, daughter of Raymond and Rowena, Jesus said to me. "Now you will be called Christian." Jesus offers us his name, knowing full well that we will deny him, desert him, betray him, forsake him, fail him. He offers us his name knowing full well we will not love him or anyone else perfectly. He offers us his name knowing full well we will revert back to our old identity. But he offers us his name knowing he alone has the power to transform, and retransform, us into something new.

We are new creations, and we are all leaders. This fall when I met with the parents at our pre-school's annual back to school night, I told them, "You are the most important pastor your children will ever know." Every single one of us, whether we are parents or not, are leaders, pastors, and shepherds. We are all commanded to feed Jesus' sheep. Even if we have failed in the past. Even if we have really messed up as a parent, or as a friend, or as a church member, or as a pastor. Us messing up is not the end of the story! Jesus does not want us to go back to our old lives. He wants to help us see our shortcomings, he wants to help us learn and grow, he wants to reinstate us, restore us, and put us to work.

I have said this before, but it would be so nice if we were all perfect, wouldn't it? Then none of us would ever have to feel the pain of being hurt by someone we love, and we would never feel the pain of hurting someone else. When I read this story, I find it amazing to realize that Jesus was not insulated from the pain of human relationships. Even Jesus was hurt by people who loved and cared about him. He was hurt by people who shared his name. And I think this is why the first thing Jesus does for Peter is provide him breakfast. He provides him a meal of bread and fish that he didn't have to catch or make himself. Jesus gives us grace. Jesus wants to put us to work, yes—but we cannot share with others what we have not received for ourselves. Whatever you need this morning—whether it's help forgiving someone who has hurt you, or help receiving forgiveness

because you've hurt someone else, Jesus is here right now offering it. And by his power, we can receive it, because we are Christians. It is our namesake to be people of grace.

When you were little, your mother and father prepared meals for you all the time. But somewhere along the way you realized, hey, I can make meals for them, too! Maybe you made your mother breakfast in bed, or helped make her a cookout lunch—or these days, maybe you are the one who knows how to use the internet to make restaurant reservations! Whatever your family traditions, we all made the transition from eating the meals provided by our parents, to being the ones to start providing the meals.

This is the essence of the communion meal. We are invited to enthusiastically receive a meal prepared for us by Christ himself. But again I want to say, there's more to the story! We are then commanded to take what we have received and share it with others. To use the grace, love, and passion for justice we have received from Christ, and share it with the world. No two people will do that in the same way. But we are all little Christs. Little Rocks. I guess you could call us all "Rocky"! Jesus is with us, asking, "Do you love me?" I know that you do. So let me ask you a question about nominative determinism: Will you claim the authority Christ gives you, as a little Christ, as a little rock and leader in building God's kingdom, and use that authority to fight for good? Amen.