

Sermon 5-15-22  
Paul Purdue preaching

Imagine yourself as Simon Peter. Peter may be the first Christian. The Gospels tell us Peter leaves behind his boats, nets, and fishing business to follow Jesus. For three years, Peter traveled from village to village with Jesus hearing Jesus preach. Like most first century believers Peter committed most of Jesus' teachings to memory. Again and again Peter heard Jesus say:

*Blessed are the humble, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart  
Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God.  
You are the light of the world, shine the light of good works  
Strive to be reconciled with others  
Love God  
Love your neighbor as yourself  
Love even your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you,  
Don't practice your faith just to be seen by others  
You cannot serve God and wealth.  
Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, liberate the oppressed  
Treat others in the same way you long to be treated  
Forgive  
Do not judge  
Prayerfully seek to build God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven.*

Peter knew all about Jesus. Peter stood on the Mount of Transfiguration as God's presence hovered over Jesus like a cloud and Jesus chatted with Elijah and Moses. Peter walked ever so briefly on the water. Peter knew if Jesus was left handed and how Christ combed his hair. Peter could look Jesus right in the eye and ask questions. When Jesus asked the disciples, "*Who do you say that I am?*" Peter became the first person to profess faith, just like you will this morning. Jesus tells Peter "*You are the rock I will build my church on... I'll hand over to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven to tighten or loosen church rules.*" Matthew 16. On Easter in Mark's telling the angel tells Magdalene, Mary and Salome to give a special greeting to Peter. "*Don't be afraid! Christ has been raised. Look, Go, tell Christ's disciples, especially Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see Christ there.*"

Who has ever known more about Jesus than Peter? If we lined up all the preachers in Tennessee: (they would not agree about Jesus and) they would not know Jesus as well as Peter! What I love about our story today, is that Peter, the Head of the church learns something new about God's Love. In fact the whole church changes its mind and learns something new. God is with us. Following Jesus means we are learning new things. Paul said, "*if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation... look, all things are being made new.*" (2 Corinthians 5:17) The baptisms vows are rooted in things you know, but the vows do not ask you so much about what you know, but about how you will live!

Do you reject evil, hate and violence?

When you sin, blow it, hurt others, will you repent and realign your living with God's Love?

Will you resist evil, injustice, and oppression?

In the hard moments of doubt or fear will you lean into Christ's grace?

Will you serve Christ?

Will you stay connected to the church and help us build a community of love and forgiveness?

Will you keep the church open to all people?

Will you model your life after Jesus' example?

Peter Jesus personally and all about Jesus! And here is the thing, not long after Jesus ascends into heaven, Peter will have a new experience that three years of year-round, 24-7 confirmation did not prepare him for! You will encounter moments when you do not know what to do. What should I wear? Should I even go with them? Is that okay? What can we do about climate change? How do we combat white supremacy? Should we become vegetarians? What should you do to earn enough money to live? Not knowing is okay. Peter did not know what to do. Peter was rooted enough in Christ's Love to change his mind about what he believed the Bible taught! Talking together, interpreting Scriptures together, praying together, and even debate allowed Peter and the Church to learn something new. The Church changed their minds and the rules! They learned new things. You will too.

In our story, the church heard that even the Gentiles or Greeks had welcomed God's Word. Doesn't the phrase "that even" sound a tad racist or bigotted? None of the early Christians ate pork, worked on the sabbath, exposed their shoulders or went to the theater. That is all fine, but they judged others as sinful who did these things! Luke tells us a group of Christians criticized Peter for hanging out with sinful people and eating un-Christian food. Peter explained a new inclusive theology step by step. Peter tells of a vision of welcoming people into the church who the church once considered as sinful. Peter explained how he resisted the idea of welcoming Gentiles and breaking life-long religious rules. Indeed, Peter argued with God, *'Absolutely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'* Peter had never eaten barbeque and he believed people who ate pork barbeque were sinful. It is easy for us who have grown up with pork barbeque to gloss over Peter's struggle with the rules. More than the rules, Peter knew the Loving example of Christ. As Peter thought about this he heard the Holy Spirit say, *'Never consider unclean what God has made pure.'* and at that very moment three "sinners" knocked on the door and invited Peter to dinner with a Roman General named Cornelius. The Spirit told Peter to go with them. During dinner, Peter saw God's Spirit present with those he once called sinful. Peter remembered what Jesus taught *"you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* Now that is not a clear cut teaching about inclusion, but Peter reasoned that *"If God gave those Gentile sinners the same gift God gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I to stand in God's way?"* Peter learns from a new experience and new information, we should too! Peter and the other disciples changed their minds and changed church rules to welcome more people into the church.

We all have moments we do not know exactly what to do. Following Jesus is not always about what we know, it is usually about who we strive to become? Will we strive to be Christ-like? And so we ask ourselves:

- Will we reject evil, hate and violence?
- When we blow it, will we reconnect with Christ's example?
- Will we resist evil, injustice, and oppression?
- Will we help build a community of love and forgiveness?
- Will we model our lives after Jesus?

Christianity is not a set of easy answers. It is not a set of rules. Christianity is about following Christ. The Easter passages remind us that Jesus is always just a little bit ahead of where the church is! The prophets call us there! Do not be afraid to follow Christ, to learn something new, and to even make a few big mistakes. God's nature is forgiveness. God's call is to love. God's presence is with us. Do not be afraid, even when you do not know what to do! Try to live after the example of Christ- that will be enough. Amen.