

Even the Fallen are Called
Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 9:31-43
May 22, 2005

As a youth living in the Reno-Sparks area, I had the opportunity to participate in a ski program on the slopes of Mt. Rose. I remember riding the school bus up on a Saturday morning, excited about learning to ski. We put on our skis and walked out onto the snow for our first lesson. The instructor told us that the first thing we needed to learn was how to fall. I had come to learn how to stand on the skis, not how to fall. What I soon came to realize was that for a while, I would probably be falling more than I would be skiing. It was important to know how to fall properly so as not to break a bone or puncture myself with the ski pole! Little did I know then that learning how to fall and fail gracefully and without too much damage was a good lesson for life.

Peter, the disciple, was a master at “putting his foot in his mouth.” He displayed his ignorance and his lack of understanding on more than one occasion. Peter was the only disciple invited by Jesus to walk on the water. As he walked toward Jesus, Peter allowed his fear of the wind to overpower his faith in Jesus. He started to sink and yelled for Jesus to rescue him, which Jesus was good at doing. But Peter blew a wonderful opportunity.

Peter did have some profound insights. He was the one who publicly confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus affirmed him, bestowing upon him the name Peter, meaning “rock,” saying, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” Early on Peter was commissioned with a foundational role in the church. Then Jesus began to explain that he was a different kind of Messiah, not a military conqueror, but rather a suffering servant who would die at the hands of those who were threatened by his leadership. Peter couldn’t understand this and scolded Jesus for such foolishness. Jesus, in turn, reprimanded Peter for his limited vision which only saw the human way of doing things, a vision that was not broad enough to consider the larger ways of God. Jesus had called Peter “the rock,” now he became known as “a stumbling block.” It’s similar to Lucy calling Charlie Brown a blockhead. Sometimes he just didn’t get it.

Not only did Peter not get it; sometimes he downright did the wrong thing. Jesus knew that his disciples would become fearful and not be able to stay with him until the end. Peter couldn’t fathom deserting Jesus. He promised, “Even though every one else might desert you, I will never desert you, Lord.” Jesus said, “But even tonight three times you will deny you even know me.” Peter said, “Not I, I will never deny you, Lord.” But we

know that Peter indeed did refuse to acknowledge that he knew the man being tried in the high priest's court.

Perhaps Jesus' grace is most visible with this man whom he had counted on to fulfill his mission. After the resurrection Jesus commissioned Peter three times, upon receiving Peter's commitment of his love for Jesus. Given his love for Jesus, Jesus then asked him to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, and feed his sheep. Jesus called Peter from fishing to sheep tending.

We see in Peter the story of one who has fallen, but still is called by God. Sometimes he's a stumbling block, but he is also a solid rock. He can stick his foot in his mouth, but he also puts his feet to marching in mission. I can identify with Peter, with his humanness, his mistakes, his failings. It's reassuring to know that Jesus calls someone with flaws to be a leader in the church. It means that we don't really have any legitimate excuses for not answering God's call. Even if we don't feel worthy, God can use us, warts, wounds, and all.

The calling that we see exemplified by Peter is one of calling the fallen to new life. Peter himself received that gift from Jesus. The Galilean fishing industry of Jesus' day was a taxing business, both in the physical and financial sense. Peter was not a fisherman for leisure; he caught fish to make a living. Fishermen trolled throughout the night on a lake subject to sudden storms. They hauled in hundreds of pounds of fish by net, gutted them for sale and transport, and tended their nets and boats. It was grimy, smelly, bloody, back-breaking work, despised by elites and sophisticates. In addition, fishing revenues were severely siphoned off by Herod's extensive bureaucracy.¹ In calling Peter to fish for people, perhaps Jesus was calling him to a more life-giving vocation for himself, as well as for others. For indeed the stories we read of Peter's ministry in Acts are moments of transformation in the lives of people held in bondage by physical, emotional, or social conditions.

Today's first short story of the healing of Aeneas is a basic example of the word, the name of Jesus Christ, creating new life where once there was bondage. Aeneas is released from the captivity of paralysis and freed for mobility. He is set free for new life by the name of Jesus Christ. Peter makes it clear that he is simply a channel, not the power itself.

There is a sense of urgent need for this freeing power in the case of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas in Greek. Tabitha's illness and death is a crisis for the community she serves, for her good works have sustained the lives of needy widows. Widows are poor, on the bottom rung of the social scale. They are the most vulnerable, with no one to represent them or protect them. Their coats and clothing are tangible evidence of what

Tabitha means to them. She carried for her community the responsibility of meeting the needs of widows, as commanded by the Hebrew Scriptures. Her death may also mean the death of the widows, for they will be abandoned. Peter's bold word and his solidarity in their suffering restore not only Tabitha, but also the widows.

Peter communicates the resurrection message that death is not the final word. The weak and vulnerable will not be abandoned to perish. The name of Jesus Christ creates a new community that operates according to a life-giving force; it is not subject to those oppressive powers that want to deny life. This new community of Christians turns things upside down. Common fishermen are preaching to the temple authorities; paralyzed old men are up, walking about and changing lives; a woman whose name means Gazelle heads a welfare program for the poor. God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to show what is true, honorable, and good.

Sometimes God uses our wounds to heal the wounded. In her new book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott tells about a friend, David Roche. David has a severe facial deformity. He was born with a benign tumor on the bottom left side of his face; surgeons tried to remove it when he was very young. He is missing his lower lip and his face is covered with radiation burns.

David says, "People assume I had an awful childhood. But I didn't. I was loved and esteemed by my parents. My face may be unique, but my experiences aren't. I believe they are universal."

"We with facial deformities are children of the dark," he said. "Our shadow is on the outside. And we can see in the dark: we can see you, we see you turn away, but one day we finally understand that you turn away not from our faces but from your own fears. From those things inside you that you think mark you as someone unlovable to your family, and society, and even to God.

"All those years, I kept my bad stories in the dark, but not anymore. Now I am stepping out into the light. And this face has turned out to be an elaborately disguised gift from God."

David speaks of the hidden scary scarred parts inside us all, the soul disfigurement, the fear deep within us that we're unacceptable. He has found that even if you don't look good, you can be happy. Lamott writes, "He lost the great big outward thing, the good-looking package, and the real parts endured. They shine through like crazy, the brilliant mind and humor, the depth of generosity, the intense blue eyes, those beautiful hands."²

David's face, flawed as it might seem to others, has been a wonderful instrument of grace, for himself and for countless others with whom he shares his story, his pain, his joy, and his love.

The Bible tells us that God called Moses, the stutterer; Rahab, the harlot; Peter, the stumbling stone. Even the fallen and flawed are called by God, to build a new community where the powers of life are stronger than death. That's what our teachers teach in Sunday school. That's the point of all the ministries of the church: to offer new life, hope and healing. May we be bold to answer God's call and share in Christ's mission of raising people to new life.

¹ F. Scott Spencer, "Follow Me: The Imperious Call of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation*, April, 2005, pp. 144-145.

² Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), pp. 105-112.

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