

A Church Worthy of Peter

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eagle River, Wisconsin

May 5, 2019

Text: John 21:1-19

In the World Series of 1912, between the New York Giants and the Boston Red Sox, during a game that had gone into extra innings, the Giants' centerfielder, Fred Snodgrass, dropped an easy fly ball. His error allowed a Red Sox player to reach scoring position at second base. That runner eventually scored, and the Red Sox went on to win the game, and eventually the Series. Even though during the regular season Snodgrass had batted 312 and had led the majors in stolen bases, those unforgiving New York fans never forgave him for his World Series error. It became known as "Snodgrass' muff," or simply as "the muff." He was traded the next year, and never batted higher than .250 in the few remaining years of his career. When he died in 1971, *The New York Times* ran the following headline for his obituary: "Fred Snodgrass, 86, Died; Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly."¹ Imagine: a whole lifetime summed up by an error! May history be kinder to each of us.

If the story of Jesus had ended with his death on a cross, if there had been no resurrection, no church to celebrate and live out the resurrection, perhaps the headline to Peter's obituary would have read, "Simon Peter, Fisherman, Died. Denied His Lord Three Times." Without the resurrection, that incident in Pilate's courtyard, when Peter, warming his hands over a charcoal fire, vehemently denied three times that he had even

¹ Cited by James Harnish, *The Christian Century*, April 6, 2010, p. 21.

known Jesus, would have become his defining moment. Peter would have been known, if not in history then certainly among his friends and in his own conscience, as the disciple who denied Jesus.

But here we are, in church this morning, not only because we have faith in a resurrected Christ, but because for Peter and for his friends, denial was not the final word, not the defining moment of their lives. After the events in Jerusalem that we followed during Holy Week and after Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his death, Peter and several other disciples went back to what they knew best: fishing. They were back at the Sea of Galilee where this whole business of following Jesus had started. Back then, Jesus, a carpenter by trade, had shown those fishermen how to catch fish, and then invited them to become fishers of people. "Follow me," he had told them. And they had dropped everything to follow him. And for a while, it had seemed like a good decision. He was charismatic and popular among the crowds, and he seemed to enjoy a special closeness to God.

But things had gone sour at the moment when they thought he would enjoy his greatest triumph, when he had entered Jerusalem to the adulation of the crowds. After that raucous procession, Jesus had angered the religious leaders by his behavior in the temple, and discomfited the Romans by the stir he had caused in that turbulent city, and within a week he was dead. But the women who had gone to tend to his body reported that he had risen from the dead as he had promised. Even two successive encounters with the risen Christ in a dark and locked upper room in Jerusalem didn't seem to have convinced his disciples of this, because there they were, back in their boat, fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

And, once again, they were having trouble catching fish. There was a stranger on the beach who called to them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. They did it, and just like the good old days, they hauled in a load of fish. It had to be Jesus. And indeed, there Jesus was, tending a charcoal fire, inviting them to breakfast.

It was a very different charcoal fire: this time it wasn't at night in the shadow of unjust power and undeserved death, but in the freshness of morning with the promise of new life. And this time it wasn't denial that was in the air, but acceptance, acceptance of the reality that death had not put an end to Jesus, acceptance of his call to his followers to be his body in the world. "Do you love me, Peter?" Jesus asked Peter three times, in perfect symmetry to the three times Peter had denied Jesus in Jerusalem, and three times Peter said, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." There may have been only a few weeks between those charcoal fires, and eighty or so miles between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee, but there was a world of difference in Peter. Peter was a transformed man.

Do you remember back in Epiphany when we read the dialogue Jesus had with his disciples about his identity? In Caesarea-Philippi, Peter, then known only as Simon, in answer to Jesus' direct question, told Jesus who he was: "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." And, according to Matthew, Jesus had responded, "And you are Peter (which means 'rock') and on this rock I will establish my church." It seemed a little strange at the time, and it got even stranger later. It was strange at the time because even during that conversation it turned out that Peter totally misunderstood Jesus' mission in the world, and Jesus rebuked him in the harshest of terms. "Get behind me Satan." And it seemed even stranger later when Peter issued those infamous denials of Jesus in Pilate's courtyard. "I do not know the man." "The rock?" we may ask incredulously. "You've got to be kidding."

But it is Peter—both the rock of faith and the supremely fallible human disciple—who is, indeed, the foundation of the church. Peter is us—both the best and the worst in us—and that's what makes Peter the exemplar of the church. Our children sing, "We are the church." And we *are* the church, both at our best and at our worst. The church was built on Peter, who was not just a paragon of virtue and courage, but also a wavering, and at times faithless, disciple of Jesus. The church built on Peter cannot claim his strength without also acknowledging his manifest imperfections.

After all, even after the “come to Jesus” moment by the Sea of Galilee recounted in today’s lesson, Peter had his moments of failure. He was stubborn about who could belong to the church, for example. For a time, until he had a rather dramatic revelation that we’ll talk about in a couple of weeks, Peter held out for the strict Jewishness of the church and for the exclusion of Gentiles who didn’t ritually become Jews. He could be short-sighted about such things. But the thing about Peter was that despite his denials and his obstinacy, he kept coming back, kept trying again to be that rock that Jesus said he would be. Tradition has it that Peter died in Rome, at the hands of the emperor; that like his Lord he was crucified, but, at his request, crucified upside-down, because he would never claim equality with Jesus.

If we are to be a church that is worthy of Peter, we will acknowledge our shortcomings, but never, ever, give up on our efforts to be faithful to Jesus. If we are to be a church that is worthy of Peter, we will go into the deeper waters when Jesus tells us to do that and become fishers of people. If we are to be a church worthy of Peter, we will continue to struggle with the difficult things Jesus tells us, that being first means being last, that we are to serve, not be served. If we are to be a church worthy of Peter, we will, at times, leave Jesus alone to be crucified, but we will, in amazement, witness the resurrection, and we will witness *to* the resurrection, and we will experience Jesus’ gentle forgiveness as we are warmed by his breakfast fire by the Sea of Galilee. If we are to be a church that is worthy of Peter, we will allow our understanding of who the church is to encompass those whom we previously excluded. Like Peter, we will continue to expand our definition of who “us” is. And, here’s the hardest part, if we are to be a church that is worthy of Peter, we will be willing to lose our old lives, as jarring and uncomfortable as that may be, in order to find new life in Christ. We will die to our old selves and be born anew, not just once, but again and again, a progression symbolized by Brianna’s baptism this morning, rising from the waters of baptism to new life.

I admire Peter not because he was an exemplar of holiness, and certainly not because he initiated a line of infallible popes, but because he was so much like us, which means that we, too, can be the rock on which Jesus' church is founded.

The church, after all, isn't our body; it's Christ's body. It's not our job to defend the church against all comers; it's our job to *be* the church, ever repentant, ever acknowledging our own shortcomings, ever faithful to the one who was and is faithful to us, faithful even to his death on a cross. It's not our job to protest our righteousness simply because we're the church; it's our job to seek righteousness, and humbly confess it when we fall short. It's our job to *be* the church, to ourselves be the rock, to feed the lambs in this world. It's our job to be a church that is worthy of its founder, Peter. The rock who is just like us, redeemed. Amen.