

### Called to a Life for Others

Peter. Ahhh, Peter. Who among us doesn't love Peter?

Maybe that's because he's the disciple with the best character development in the Bible. Who knows anything about Thaddeus, or Bartholomew, or James the son of Alphaeus?

But Peter, we know. We know he was a fisherman from Capernaum, a town on the Sea of Galilee. We know he was married, because he had a mother-in-law. We know his brother was Andrew and his father was John, and until Jesus gave him the nickname of "Rocky," or Peter, he was called Simon.

But even more than these biographical facts, we know what he was like as a person. When Jesus said to him, "follow me," he dropped everything—his nets, his livelihood, all he knew—and with his brother Andrew, set out on the adventure of following Jesus. That tells us he could be bold, instinctive, and decisive. When Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" he was the one who was quick to answer, "You are the Christ." That tells us he was insightful, quick to speak, and a leader. That's when Jesus renamed him. But moments later, Simon, now called Peter, rejected what Jesus tried to tell them about his torture and death, and the next thing you knew, Jesus was calling him "Satan." That tells us Peter could be shallow and easily led astray. The same pattern of sheer faith followed by shallow faith is in evidence when Peter jumps out of the boat to walk on water toward Jesus, then suddenly realizes where he is and what he's doing, and sinks. Peter is devoted to Jesus, always at his side. But he falls asleep when Jesus asks him to stay awake. He promises absolute loyalty, and then when crunch time comes, he denies even knowing Jesus, three times on the same critical night, when Jesus is undergoing trial. Just as Jesus told him he would.

I think we are drawn to Peter because we can identify with his weaknesses. I hope we can also identify with him when we hear this intimate, poignant post-resurrection conversation between Peter and the risen Christ. I think it is a conversation Christ wants to have with all of us.

**Do you love me?** The basis of a disciple's relationship with Jesus Christ is love for him. All the outward behaviors—being baptized, going to church, calling oneself a Christian—are just that, outward behaviors. It is love for Jesus which defines his true disciples.

**Do you love me?** he asks. Sometimes a relationship with Christ starts with intellectual interest in his teachings. This looks like a good way to live, I can go along with that. Sometimes we confuse correct thinking with being a good disciple. But Jesus asks us to love him and devote our entire selves to him.

**Do you love me?** he asks each one of us. That third time asking the same question is exasperating to all of us. I already said yes. Why do you have to keep asking? He keeps asking because he wants us to commit to the deep waters of faith, the lifelong relationship which won't fade when things get rough. He keeps asking for our love because he loves us infinitely.

I believe our identification with Peter is meant to continue in this conversation when Jesus gives Peter his instructions, his commission. The first time, he says, "Feed my lambs." The second time, it's "Tend my sheep." And the third time, "Feed my sheep." In the Bible, there is a long tradition using

“shepherd” and “sheep” as a figure of speech to describe God’s relationship with humanity. “The Lord is my shepherd” remains a beloved psalm even in an urbanized world. Jesus adopted the image when he taught, “I am the good shepherd.” So when he tells Peter to take care of his sheep, he is giving Peter a responsibility to look out for people.

Now, some might see Peter’s post-Easter transformation into a bold, fearless leader and draw a line—that’s for those rare few like Peter, not me. But I believe the essence of Jesus’ words are indeed directed at all of us. “Tend my sheep” reminds us that love for Jesus ALWAYS calls us to care for others. Always. Scripture reminds us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27) And, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” (John 13:34) And, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:13) If this is Peter’s call, then it is our call also. For if there is one thing all our individual Christian calls have in common, it is this: to live a life for others, not just for ourselves.

Learning to live for others is part of growing up, becoming a mature human being. Self-absorption, we discover, doesn’t actually lead to satisfaction in life. Giving ourselves to the world does.

Earlier this week I had the opportunity to watch some Special Olympics events. The pool area at Eaglemount was filled with excited athletes, ready to show their abilities to cheering families and supporters. And then the races began.

I had noticed that on one side of the 25-meter pool there is a long ramp to allow people in waterproof wheelchairs to safely enter the pool. And while the races were going on, an able-bodied young man wheeled a physically handicapped older man down this ramp, where he was propped against the wall and the wheelchair was removed. Two more people, both handicapped adults, entered the water this same way. Two of the three helpers stayed with their people. It looked like they all were simply soaking in the pool, watching the races.

But then came the announcement that the “15-meter aquatic walking” event was about to begin. The whistle blew, and the first of these three contestants began a solo walk across the pool. He was tall, and the water barely reached his waist. The crowd cheered him on. He was so proud when he made it across. The second athlete walked with his companion close by his side. If you looked really closely, you could see a gap of just a couple inches between them—this man who could not walk on land on his own, was walking independently in the water. His companion was there for safety. And when they finished their lap across the pool, they both had a look of triumph on their faces, sheer joy. The third athlete was a woman, and they called her event something like the “15-meter aquatic float,” because she made her way across the pool with her upper body resting on a life vest. Her companion was in front, every so often giving the life vest a little tug to keep her going forward. All the way across, and especially when they reached the far side, the crowd cheered.

The aquatics center felt like a world where everyone was living a life for others, not just for themselves. I know there are a number of people in this congregation who volunteer with Special Olympics or Eaglemount who could testify to what a great feeling this is. Or maybe you’ve felt the exhilaration of helping someone through Family Promise, or Love INC. Or, depending on your gifts and situation, it could be that your job is one in which you have the thrill of walking alongside people whose lives are lifted when you share yourself with them. This is the way we should live all our lives—for others, not just for our own little selves.

This is the lesson Peter needed to learn, the lesson which would instill courage and purpose for all the challenges still ahead of him. It was time for him to really grow up, and grow into the call set before him. Without Jesus' physical presence in the world, the disciples would need to feed the people with the gospel, to heal the sick and lame, and to stand up to the authorities risking jail and even death. Well, just read the book of Acts and you'll find out that's exactly what Peter, lily-livered Peter, did. He preached the story of salvation on Pentecost. He became the leader of the Jerusalem church. He took the good news of Jesus Christ to the Samaritans and to Caesarea, where he welcomed the first Gentile into the company of Jesus' people. He traveled far beyond the shores of the Sea of Galilee, to Corinth and even to Rome. And after several decades of this bold living for others, he was martyred on a cross.

We're not all called to martyrdom, (sigh of relief!) but we are all called to live for others. The foundation of our relationship with Jesus Christ is love for him, responding to his love for us. The manifestation of our relationship with Jesus Christ is love for others. Mature Christian faith looks like putting the needs of others before our own, caring for the needy, tending the sheep all around us, loving one another.

We can start with those nearest to us, perhaps those in our families. And some may find the needs there so great that all their efforts need to be devoted to the care of that small flock. Others can answer the call through local service. There's a quilt hanging on the wall of the Fellowship Hall which displays the many specific ways people from our congregation live out their faith in our community. If you are searching for ideas of what you might do, check it out. Still others have a call to tend the sheep beyond our local reach. Is there a place in the world crying out for the gifts you have? Or is there a group of people with a common need which might be met by your efforts? Are you ready to meet the world's deep hunger with your deep gladness, giving your life for others?

For I am confident that Simon Peter slept better, achieved more satisfaction, and felt more in tune with God's will for his life in the years after the resurrection than in the years he was learning from Jesus and failing to live up to his call. Forgiven by Christ, he set his face forward and felt the deep gladness of deep commitment to fulfilling his call to tend Christ's sheep.

"Do you love me?" asks Jesus. May our resounding "yes" show in our common life, and in our life in the world. The world is full of hungry sheep. Let's show them Christ's infinite love.