

“Finding the Best That Is In Us”

a sermon by

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Text: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Some years ago, when I was a graduate student at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, I remember a conversation with German friends. One evening we were talking about the process of selecting names for children. In my family most of us used family names. Children were named after parents, grandparents, or others members of the family. My German friends objected to that practice. In fact, they were adamant about it. They did not believe that children should receive family names at all. As the conversation heated up, it soon became obvious to me that there was something more at stake than finding the right names for children.

Finally, it came to the surface. Both of my friends had parents who were members of the Nazi party in Germany. Both of their fathers had fought for Germany in World War II. Both were deeply ashamed of what the Germans had done to the Jews. They longed, not

for a continuation of the past, but for a break with the past. They named their children David and Anna, both Jewish names taken from the Old Testament.

I.

There is something powerful in a name. Throughout the Old and New Testament there is the notion that the name of an individual is an integral part of that person's identity. In the creation stories in Genesis, Adam is given the power to name the animals, thus giving him control and dominance over all living creatures. In the ancient story of Jacob wrestling with the angel at Peniel we read that on that occasion Jacob's name was changed. He was to be called "Israel" and he would be the father of all the tribes of Israel.

The Gospel of Matthew contains the story of Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, which Peter made at Caesarea Philippi. Matthew follows Mark's gospel in making this confession a pivotal part of his gospel. It begins the final part of Jesus' ministry, as he moves from Galilee to Jerusalem and to the death that awaits him there.

In Matthew's gospel, however, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi becomes the occasion for something new. It marks a change in his name. Simon is now to be called "Peter." The name "Peter" is taken from the Greek word "Petra," which means rock. There is more than a little irony in Jesus using this name. There was nothing in Peter to suggest that he was stable, predictable, or strong. In fact, he was just the opposite. He was mercurial, temperamental, vacillating, swift in emotion, and uncertain in stability.

And yet, Jesus saw something in Peter that Peter probably could not see in himself. He saw in Peter firmness, solidarity, and a stability that Jesus said the church would be founded on. And that is something that has great value for us today.

So how do people find the best that is within them?

II.

For one thing, they find themselves. Peter did that. In many ways he was one of the worst of the disciples. He denied Jesus three times. He fled the crucifixion. He acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, but immediately rebuked Jesus when Jesus said that it was necessary for the "Son of Man" to go to Jerusalem and to undergo great suffering at the hands of the chief priests and scribes and be killed.

But Peter was more than that. He was the "rock" on which the church was founded. In every list of the disciples Peter is the first mentioned. When Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Christ, Jesus told her to go and tell Peter.

One of the great challenges that parents encounter is learning to allow their children to pursue their own dreams, to find things in their lives that interest them. My son, Will, as a small boy always loved cars and mechanical things. He was very skilled at building things

and as a teenager loved repairing cars. After he graduated from college he entered the NASCAR technical school. He was offered the chance to go to work for a number of companies, but he had the dream that he wanted to open his own business. And that is what he is doing.

So often, people find themselves pursuing other people's dreams, but not having a clue how to pursue their own dreams. One of the best pieces of advice someone gave me was, "Be yourself." Never mind if someone else is smarter, wiser, greater, more useful. That is not your affair. Be yourself--at your best. Maybe you are not a ten-talent person. Maybe you only have one talent. But take that talent and use it.

Once, there was an actor by the name of Charles Brookfield. When he died the newspaper put in his obituary this sentence: "Never a great actor, he was invaluable in small parts." Some may not take that as a compliment, but I believe it is a great compliment. He got out of himself the best that was there - not a great actor, but invaluable in small parts.

III.

There is something else in this matter of getting the best out of a person and it is a vital religious faith, a deep conviction about God and Jesus Christ, a conviction that our life is not an accident but that our lives are rooted in the eternal purposes of God.

One of the highlights of the Olympics in Athens this week was the performance of Paul Hamm on Thursday. A gymnast, he was in the middle of a routine when he made a horrendous landing and fell. He was devastated and convinced that he could not win. However, he recovered himself to the point that he continued with a flawless performance that gave him the gold medal. There is something very powerful about the capacity of a person to recover from a devastating setback. *The Charlotte Observer*, in its editorial on Friday, recalled Winston Churchill speaking to a group of young students at Harrow, his old school, in the early days of World War II. Churchill said to these students: "You cannot tell from appearances how things will go." But to those who had endured the German onslaught, he said, "This is the lesson: Never give in, never give in: never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in."

The life of Simon Peter is the witness of a life of a person whose faith in God and Christ sustained him. As Paul Achtemeier once observed, the picture of the disciples that is painted in the New Testament is not a very flattering one. "If there is any progression in the picture Mark paints of the disciples, it appears to be from bad to worse. This is true particularly of Peter. At first he does not understand Jesus. But when Jesus proclaims that his death is necessary, Peter moves from misunderstanding to rejection. Although Peter is always portrayed as the primary disciple, he is a strange mixture of faithfulness and failure."

His life is a witness to this. He is the first disciple Jesus called. He is the first to declare that Jesus is the Christ. He is most often the spokesman for the other disciples. But he was also the one whom Jesus called “Satan;” he is the one who fell asleep in Gethsemane; he is the one who denied Jesus three times.

Yet, it is clear that something happened to Peter after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He emerges in the early Church as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He is the one person the Apostle Paul consults with, when Paul came to Jerusalem.

For a number of years scholars have debated the nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are those who believe that Jesus did not actually rise from the dead but rather that the memory of Jesus’ life sustained the early church. N. T. Wright argues that the bodily resurrection of Jesus isn’t a take it or leave thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and some welcome not to believe it.

One of the most convincing arguments for the resurrection of Christ was the enormous change that took place in the lives of these disciples. Something changed Simon Peter from a vacillating, fearful, ineffective leader to a person who became the rock of the early church. That is what faith in God can do for a person.

IV.

There is something else that brings out the best in a person and it is a strong sense of ambition. Now, ambition, as most of us know, can be a very dangerous thing. If misused, it can lead to arrogance, corruption, and destruction. But ambition has its place. No one ever succeeded in any endeavor without the dream that they could do something important.

One of great disappointments that I have in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today is that we are a denomination that appears to be heading to oblivion. This past year we lost another 40,000 members. Moreover, our leadership seems determined to follow a course that guarantees that the trend will continue. We are closing churches instead of building new ones. The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly in Louisville has recommended that the Historical Society in Montreat be consolidated with the one in Philadelphia.

Where is the vision? Where are the leaders? Where are the ministers and elders who believe that the Presbyterian Church should be a growing, dynamic church, rather than a church headed for oblivion?

I think the same could be said about this church. So often we think of the church in terms of what we want: our friends, our priorities, and our politics. But when was the last time we asked ourselves, “What kind of church does God want us to be?”

I, for one, believe that God has given this church a great opportunity for a great witness for Jesus Christ in the heart of a great city. We are a growing church in a growing

neighborhood in a growing city. We have the resources in this church to change the entire direction of the city of Charlotte, to make this community a more compassionate, more livable community that provides opportunities for every single citizen in this city. How tragic it would be if we settled for second best when greatness was in our grasp.

There is nothing more fundamental to the Christian faith than the notion that Jesus Christ has the power to change people's lives. None of us have to stay the same.

Tomorrow we are all going out into a difficult world. Tomorrow we will go to work in a society that often appeals not to our best but our worst. Tomorrow we will be tempted to think that we cannot get the best out of ourselves amidst all the handicaps and difficulties that we face. Tomorrow we are likely to forget that difficult days do two things to people: in some they bring out the worst, in others they bring out the best.

Tomorrow that test is going to fall on some of us. The Christian gospel is a gospel that rests on the fundamental notion that God can take something ordinary and change it into something extraordinary.

So today let us hear that word of transformation. Simon, Simon, you are a rock.

Amen.