Sunday February 28, 1982

"PETER" Matthew 16-13-19
(first in a series)

Jesus Christ was not a political revolutionary. But in another sense, he may have been the most radical revolutionary who ever lived on this earth, for what he did was to take people who up to that point had not seen themselves as having much potential, people who saw themselves as worthless and he inspired them to take responsibility for their lives and powers as never before. Jesus was effective in getting people to act on the best that was in them rather than the worst. He said to the men and women he met that they were to repent of their low self-esteem that they had allowed others to put on them, and believe the good news of who they really were and could become under God.

In other words, Jesus revealed in a new way the divine dimension in all of us. In every person he met, he saw this divinity--the image of God. So he urged people to pick up their beds and walk and to go and sin no more. He didn't enter into any debates considering the worthiness of the individual to be healed. He said to everyone--you can be free from sin; you can overcome; you can be healed, not because I am something special, but because you are something special, because after all you are a child of God.

This is an important emphasis. Recently a woman was confiding to me her feelings about religion and the church. She said, "I gave up church years ago and I'll tell you why. I used to go to church faithfully every week; and Sunday after Sunday I heard the same old broken record about the sinfulness of human beings, how we are all miserable sinners, unfit to darken the doorsteps of God. I finally faced myself with the question, 'Why should I go to church week after week to have the preacher tell me how awful I am. I already know that. I need somebody to tell me about the goodness that is in me and help me to reach it and find it. And if there isn't any goodness in me, then I might as well forget the whole thing.'"

Jesus saw the potential and the good in people. He saw it in Peter. The clown-like qualities of being a bumbler and a buffoon were evident in Peter from the very beginning,

and it is important to note that he never grew beyond them completely. He was capable right up to the end of saying the wrong thing or saying too much, or acting in foolish and inappropiate ways. Yet for all of his falling and failing ways, Jesus saw more in him than that, and from the first he began to call that high potential forth in Peter. "You have been a fisher of fish," Jesus said at the outset, but you have it in you to become a fisher of people."

"You have the tendencies to be unstable and vacillating, but more important, you also have rock-like qualities and I can build my church with people like you," and this is in fact what happened.

When we turn to the book of Acts in the New Testament which tells the story of the early church, we see in Peter now a man of courage and compassion, a man who emerged as the leader of the Jerusalem Church. He bears little resemblance to the man who earlier is jumping in and out of fishing boats. But it is the same person and the creative link between this "before and after" is the unique ministry of Jesus, who could see the divine in each human being and could therefore see the potential.

But let's back up a bit now and take a closer look at this man called Peter--at what he was and what he became and why.

In every list of the twelve disciples, it is Peter who is mentioned first. Peter is the name by which we know him best, but in the New Testament he had other names as well.

When he first appears on the scene, he is called Simon. He is the brother of Andrew who first introduced him to Jesus. Simon is his given name. Twice in the New Testament, Peter is called by the name Symeon. Symeon is the original Hebrew form of his name, and Simon is the Gentile modification.

How then did Simon become Peter? It was Jesus himself who gave Simon his new name. When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus said: "You are Simon the Son of Jona; you shall from now on be called Cephas, which means 'a stone." Cephas and Peter are different forms of the same name. Cephas is Aramaic, and Peter is the Greek form of the name. Jona means a dove. So what Jesus is saying to Peter is this: "Up to now you have been like a fluttering dove; but if you will follow me, I will make you a rock."

And that's what Peter became--a rock. We know more about Peter than any of the other twelve, and that may well be because of the very close connection between Peter and Mark. So close was this connection that when Peter wrote his own first letter, he could speak of "Mark, my son." It is believed that when Mark wrote his Gospel, he got much of his material directly from Peter.

Peter was a fisherman, and it was from the boats and nets that Jesus called him. Peter was a married man. His home was in Capernaum, a small town by the sea of Galilee. It may well be that Peter's house was Jesus' headquarters when he was in Capernaum, for it was there Jesus went when he came out of the synagogue and it was there that he healed Peter's mother-in-law.

Peter was a Galilaean, and a typical Galilaean. It was said of the Galilaeans--"They were ever fond of innovations and by nature disposed to changes and delighted in seditions. They were ready always to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection. They were notoriously quick in temper, and given to quarrelling, but at the same time they were the most chivalrous of men. They were never short on courage." Quick-tempered, impulsive, emotional, easily aroused by an appeal to adventure, loyal to the end--Peter was a typical man of Galilee.

Within the twelve disciples, there emerged an inner circle, an executive committee of three who were especially close to Jesus--Peter, James and John. They were with Jesus at the raising of Jairus' daughter; with him on the Mount of Transfiguration; with him in the Garden of gethsemance, and it was Peter and John who were sent on ahead to prepare for the Last Supper in Jerusalem.

In the Gospel records, Peter stands out as the spokesman for the twelve. It is Peter who asks the meaning of a difficult saying. It is Peter who asks how often he is to forgive, and who inquires what is to be the reward of those who had left all to follow Jesus. It is Peter who asks about the fig tree which had withered away and about the meaning of the things which Jesus said about the approaching end. It was Peter who answered when Jesus asked who had touched him in the crowd and it was Peter who answered when Jesus asked the all important question--"Who do you say that I am?"

Peter replied--"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

But Peter was also impulsive and weak. Not long after this, as Jesus was explaining that he would soon suffer and die, Peter, shocked and horrified, protested that these things would never be. He was gently rebuked by Jesus. Later Peter strongly insisted that no matter what came to pass, he would never deny Christ. Yet just a few hours later, when put to the test, Peter denied several times that he ever knew Jesus.

Like all of us, Peter was weak as well as strong.

----------HYMN----------

But the story of Peter does not end with his denial, or with his other weaknesses!

It is clear from the Gospel stories that after the death of Jesus, Peter rejoined the other disciples. That in itself was an act of courage. Then on Easter Sunday morning, after the women who had first gone to the tomb and found it empty, it was Peter who came and entered the tomb to see if it was true. We don't know exactly what happened a few hours later when he personally met the risen Christ, but we can be sure that he experienced forgiveness and found new strength.

And then the story of Peter continues on into the establishment and leadership of the early church in Jerusalem. It was Peter who took the lead and suggested that a replacement be found for Judas. It was Peter who preached the first sermon on Pentecost. In the years following, he was arrested time and time again for his preaching and organizing.

Perhaps the most courageous step that Peter ever took was the receiving of Cornelius, a Gentile, into the membership of the early Christian Church. Whether or not Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews, was the first big dispute in the early church. It was Peter with the Apostle Paul who realized the univeral reach of the Gospel of Christ. It was another way of saying that God loves all people everywhere--no matter what race, or what color, or what religion, or what sex.

With the decision to have the Christian Church open to all people, men and women, slaves and free, Gentile and Jew, no matter what kind of background or family tree, the church was able to become a world-wide movement, otherwise it would've remained a small sect of the Jewish religion and nothing more.

Sometimes it's difficult for us today to realize how revolutionary that decision was, or how revolutionary is the message that God loves all people equally, or that each one of us has the divine within us as well as surrounding us. Each human being is a child of God, made in God's image. Each one of us is an expression of the Living God.

A non-Christian is simply a child of God who doesn't know it. This means there are no bad or weak people, there are only good people expressing themselves incompletely; people who do not know they are made in the image of God.

If you know you are God's child, then you also know you are of the utmost importance to God and you must have something important to do with your life. God knows your name.

Too many of us believe from little on up that if we are ever going to amount to anything, then we have to make something of ourselves and that we have to work and work to have any value or self-worth. So we become overly competitive people who are forever trying to make a name for ourselves in order to fill that awful vacuum of emptiness at the center of our beings. We believe we are nobodies and that we have to remake ourselves in somebodies.

But because we are God's children, and have the divine within us from the moment of our birth, there's literally nothing we can do or acquire that will give us any more value than what we already have. There is ultimate worth in us from the moment we were created and it is placed there by God.

THis is what Peter began to realize after he met Jesus Christ. He began to experience and see God in a new way and he saw himself and other human beings in a new way. Cornelius the Gentile was also a child of God and had as much value to God as any other human being. Peter came to understand that God is not just a object of worship,

but a living, vital presence within us and all around us, a loving force and power which holds all of creation together. God is the energy which keeps the universe going.

Peter had grown up, like us, with a primitive concept of God--God as big person, somewhere out there. But when we think of God as a person, then God has to be "out there" or "up there." Then we are forever trying to reach God or locate God or influence God. When the first Russian Cosmonaut orbited the earth, he came back saying, "There is no God, for I DID NOT SEE HIM OUT THERE." Of course he didn't see God out there as an object. He didn't see the force of gravity either.

Peter, the new person, continued as a leader in the early church. Tradition has it that he finally went as far as Rome, probably around AD 61, and that he was killed there for being a Christian. There are all kinds of legends about Peter in Rome, especially connected with his death. It is said that he asked to be crucified upside down, for he was not worthy to die as his Lord as died.

The important thing for us today is to realize that Peter's experience of God can be our experience. Our weakness can become strength. We too can come to have a new understanding of ourselves and of God. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most important thing about you? Tell the group what you think it is.

2. Describe your concept of God.

3. What caused Peter to become a changed person? Can you change in the same way? What's holding you back?

4. Do you have trouble feeling self worth? Self esteem? Why?

5. Do you, like Peter, feel forgiven for your failures?

6. What are some of the signs that point to the fact that you are God's child, made in the image of God?