

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Please forgive me this! I can't help it. I'm a 60s kind of guy. But as I started reflecting on this Feast, I couldn't help but think, "Where's Mary?" You know "Peter, Paul, and Mary". Remember, "If I had a hammer..." That's pretty bad, isn't it?

We better stick to the Gospel. First of all, it's important to understand that Peter and Paul were totally different people. It's hard to believe that they even liked each other.

But some friendships are like that. I once had a dear friend, ordained about five years before me who was the smartest person I ever knew. Tom had achieved a Masters degree in physics before he even came to the Seminary. I barely passed high school physics. Somehow we became dear friends even though we argued and debated a lot. He told me once that he wished I were half as passionate as me. I responded by telling him I wished I was one-tenth as smart as him. We appreciated each other's gifts and our friendship enriched us both. I think it was like that with Peter and Paul.

Peter was a weather-beaten fisherman from Galilee. He was rough, boisterous, impetuous, and quick-tempered. Remember it was he who cut off the ear of the centurion's servant in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Paul, on the other hand, was a Roman citizen, a Jewish Pharisee, educated in the law, probably both civic and religious. He had been a keeper of tradition, a watchdog for any deviation from the law. He was an orator who commanded an audience. Were he alive today, prior to his conversion experience, he would probably be a Fox News commentator.

What could they possibly have in common? Even their experience of Jesus was totally different. Peter was among Jesus' first disciples, following him from the shore of the Sea of Galilee, throughout his ministry to Jerusalem, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Paul's first experience was of the risen Jesus, after his ascension to the Father. He was on the road to Damascus, in pursuit of the blasphemous Jews who were proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ.

My favorite Biblical image of Peter is his encounter with Jesus as it's recounted in the 21st chapter of John's Gospel. After the resurrection encounters, not knowing what to do, Peter decides to go home and go fishing. Some of the other disciples decide to go with him. After catching nothing all night, a seeming stranger tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and they take in a huge haul. Peter recognizes it is the Lord, jumps in the water, and swims a hundred yards to shore. Jesus tells them to bring the fish to a fire he has prepared. They cook it and sit down to eat.

Now, up until this time, no words have been exchanged between Jesus and Peter since the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter went on to deny Jesus three times, and he knows that Jesus knows. What can he say to him? What will Jesus say to him? Will he chastise him? Tell him how disappointed he is in him? No, he simply asks, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?” Quickly Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love You~!” At which Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he put the question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter said, “You know that I love you.” Jesus replied, “Tend my sheep.” A third time Jesus asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because he had asked a third time, “Do you love me?” So he said to him, “Lord, you know everything. You know well that I love you.”

Isn't that an awesome picture! A fantastic encounter of mercy, repentance, and forgiveness, and love!

The encounter between Jesus and Paul is likewise fascinating in its detail, as found in Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles. “As he traveled along and was approaching Damascus, a light from the sky flashed about him. He fell to the ground and at the same time heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? “Who are you, sir?” he asked. The voice answered, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do.” Saul gets up, but now blind, having to be led by the hand. After three days without eating or drinking, Ananias is told to go to him, telling him, “This man is the instrument I have chosen to bring my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. Ananias goes to him and tells him, “Saul, my brother, I have been sent by the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the way here, to help you recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit,” Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, and his strength returned to him after he had taken food...Saul, for his part grew steadily more powerful, and reduced the Jewish community of Damascus to silence with his proofs that Jesus was the Messiah.”

Did you notice that Jesus tells Simon the fisherman to feed his lambs, to tend his sheep. And he leads Paul, the erudite lawyer, to proclaim to Jew and Gentile alike that, because of Christ Jesus, they are no longer bound by the Mosaic law. He leads them into service, into ministries, diametrically opposed to what they had been. Peter the Fisherman is now to tend and build up the flock of Jesus' followers. Paul the lawyer is now to proclaim Christ's law of love as superior to the Mosaic Law, which he does so eloquently in Two Corinthians.

What Peter and Paul have in common is an uncommon faith in Jesus, the Christ. That gives them the strength, the courage, and the power to so extend a relatively tiny band of believers to the point that here we are more than 2,000 years later proclaiming in Word and Sacrament that Jesus is Lord.

If we allow the stories of their lives and their faith to permeate our consciousness, can we not see that the Risen Christ is likewise calling each of us to a ministry of service to continue building up his Kingdom on earth. As with Peter and Paul, he may not be calling us to minister in a way in which we are comfortable. More than likely He is calling each of us out of our comfort zones so that it is apparent that the ministry we are performing is not about us, but it is Christ working in us. We are being called to work at the building up of his Kingdom in such a way that each of us can say with Paul, “Now, it is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me.”

Maybe like the pre-Resurrection Peter you have denied that Jesus is all that important in your life. Or like Paul, you have been content to follow the rules, thinking that’s good enough to please God. Then open your hearts, expand your minds, enable your spirits to make your profession of faith with Peter and experience a conversion to discipleship with Paul.

Doesn’t each of us want to be able to say with Paul, “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just Judge, will award me on that day, and not only on me, but to all who have longed for his appearance...To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”