

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”

Peter: At His Best—At His Worst

Matthew 16:13-25

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We are learning about discipleship from the first disciples of Jesus. We want to see how they followed Jesus so we can see better how we can follow Jesus. The paintings of Jesus and the Apostles by Kenneth Wyatt are our starting point

(http://www.kennethwyatt.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&StoreCode=KWG&Category_Code=KWCA). Last week, we looked at Jesus as the example or pattern for disciples, using the portrait of Jesus pouring water into the basin as he prepared to wash the disciples’ feet.

Kenneth Wyatt published a little book to accompany the paintings (*The Apostles*). It includes a reproduction of each painting with a brief word about each apostle, some of Wyatt’s choices in painting them, and a little bit about the models he used for each one. The one exception was the man who was the basis for his painting of Jesus. At first he refused to pose for a painting of Jesus, but eventually he agreed provided that Wyatt would tell no one his name or where he lived. That’s in keeping with the humility Jesus shows.

Jesus is our example, our pattern. We are his disciples. A disciple is a student, a learner, a follower, an apprentice. We are so taken with Jesus, so captured by his holiness and love and intelligence, that we want to be with him, learn from him, follow his example, and pattern our lives after him. It’s not that we try to do everything Jesus did in his earthly life. But we try to do what we do the way Jesus did what he did. God wants to shape our inner life to be like the inner life of Jesus so that we can live now like Jesus did then. By the Holy Spirit, the life of Jesus is in us so we can live our lives the way Jesus would live if he were in our place.

We learn from Jesus how to live. And we can learn from other followers of Jesus. That’s why we’re looking at his first followers and seeing what we can learn from them about being followers of Jesus here and now.

We begin with Simon Peter. He is first in all the lists of the apostles. So often he was the spokesman for the disciples. The Gospels and Acts mention him more than any of the others. I'm going to retell his story and highlight some scenes where we see him at his best and at his worst. If Jesus could transform and work through someone like Simon Peter, he can transform us and work through us.

We first meet Simon when his brother Andrew brings him to Jesus. Simon and Andrew were apparently disciples of John the Baptist, or at least interested in John's ministry. But when Jesus came on the scene, John started directing his followers toward Jesus. Jesus says, "'You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas' (which when translated, is Peter)" (John 1:41-42). Jesus gives not just a new name, but also a new nature. Simon will spend the rest of his life living up to the new name Jesus gave him, becoming Peter, the Rock. Where are you in that journey? Are you becoming who Jesus calls you to be?

So Simon Peter meets Jesus somewhere along the Jordan River in the Judean countryside. Later, Jesus and this first group of disciples go back to Galilee where they are from. Simon appears to continue in the fishing business for some time. But at some point Jesus calls Simon and some others to come with him, to follow him in his mission of fishing for people. Luke tells us that this call came after Jesus had sat in Peter's boat teaching the people who were on the shore. Then he urged Peter to go out into the deep water and let down the nets for a catch. Though Peter protested, "We've fished all night and caught nothing," he knew enough about Jesus to go on and say, "Yet at your word, I will let down the nets." When he did, they caught so many fish that the nets began to break and the boats began to sink. Peter, recognizing the greatness of Jesus, said, "Go away from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man!" But that's when Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. From now on you'll be catching people" (Luke 5:1-11).

Peter and the others start going where Jesus goes, listening to what Jesus says, watching what Jesus does. They see Jesus heal many people. One of the first healing stories in the Gospels is when Jesus heal Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31). So we know Peter was married since he had

a mother-in-law. Later, the apostle Paul mentions that Peter had a wife (1 Corinthians 9:5).

Peter was among the twelve disciples that Jesus called, appointed and authorized to go out as Jesus' representatives and messengers. Along with the others, Peter went in mission several times, proclaiming God's kingdom, healing the sick, driving out demons.

Peter was part of an "inner circle of disciples" that also included James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were the only disciples Jesus took with him into the house of Jairus whose daughter had died. They got to see the miracle as Jesus took her by the hand and said, "Little girl, get up" (Mk 5:41). Peter, James, and John were with Jesus on the mountain when he was transfigured, revealing his glory. Remember, Peter was the only one who spoke up, telling Jesus they should put up tents for him and Moses and Elijah. "Some people are silent when they don't know what to say. Peter was the kind who felt obligated to say something, even if it happened to be the wrong thing." We like him because he's so much like us (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 17). Later, when Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed, their questions prompted him to explain about the temple's destruction and the time of the end when he would return (Mk 13). These three disciples went with Jesus farther into the Garden of Gethsemane while he prayed, "Let this cup pass from me, but not my will but yours be done" (Mk 14:32-42).

One of the great stories about Simon Peter, that captures the highs and lows of his life, is in Matthew 14:22-33. Jesus had fed more than five thousand people by multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish. He gave them to the disciples to give to the crowd. So Peter was part of that miracle. After that, Jesus sent the disciples on ahead in the boat while he stayed, dismissed the crowd and then went up on a mountainside to pray. Late in the night, the disciples were struggling because the wind and waves were tossing their boat. Jesus came walking to them on the water. At first the disciples thought he was a ghost. But Jesus said to them, "I am. Fear not!" Impetuous Peter said, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," Jesus said.

Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. Wow! Talk about a high point. Talk about feeling like you're at your best. But then Peter started looking around at the wind and waves. He panicked and started to sink. He only had time for a quick prayer: "Lord, save me!" Have you ever been there—when all you can say is, "Lord, save me! Help me!"

Jesus reached out his hand to Peter, pulled him up and said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" We have to keep our eyes on Jesus and trust him.

Another episode shows Peter at his best and his worst. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Remember, "Son of Man" is how Jesus frequently refers to himself. They have some answers. They've been listening to what people are saying. "Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets." People were confused and held many different ideas about who Jesus was and what he was about. That's still the case today. If we did a nationwide survey about views of Jesus, we would probably be surprised at the variety.

But Jesus pushes further. He asks, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter, so often the spokesman, answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus was overjoyed and responded, "God bless you, Simon. You didn't learn that answer from any person. My Father in heaven revealed this to you. He let you in on the secret of who I really am."

Jesus poses that question to each of us: "Who do you say I am?" And our response is vitally important. We are not left to come up with just any answer on our own. The question is not, "Who is Jesus to you?" as though any answer a person has is O.K. There is a correct answer. And Peter gave it because God told him the answer.

We need to discover for ourselves that Jesus is the Messiah—God's chosen ruler—and the Son of God. Our knowledge of Jesus can't be second hand. Being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, does not mean just knowing about Jesus. It means knowing Jesus. Jesus Christ demands a personal decision. He asks every one, "*You—what do you think of me?*"

Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus then said, "You are truly blessed in knowing who I really am. Now I'm going to tell you who you really are. You are no longer shifting sand, Simon. I'll call you 'Rocky.'" The Greek name *Petros* or Peter means "rock."

As we come to know Jesus for ourselves, we come to know ourselves as we really are and as God intends us to be.

Jesus goes on to talk about building his church on the rock. Jesus is the foundation, but Peter or Peter's confession may be the first stone of the building on the foundation. This was probably the highest moment of Peter's life.

In that moment of impetuous inspiration, Peter gave the church its basic creedal statement; in one impulsive sentence, he summed up the doctrine of Christianity. On the rock of that confession, the church stands or falls.

But as surely as Peter set the course of the church in that awesome moment, within perhaps the same hour he previewed our frequent failures. (Kalas 17)

After Jesus affirms Peter's great confession, he orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. There were too many misunderstandings, too many nationalistic dreams or selfish imaginings about what the Messiah would be and do. So Jesus starts telling his disciples about the kind of Messiah he is. He is one who will suffer, be killed and then be raised to life.

A suffering Messiah didn't fit into the Jewish hopes. Again, Peter is the spokesman. He says to Jesus, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" He only heard the suffering and dying part. He couldn't imagine Jesus going through that. He meant well. He loved Jesus and wanted to protect him. Peter had his own ideas about what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah and what Jesus just said didn't fit in with those ideas. So he rebukes Jesus. He tries to straighten Jesus out. Peter takes hold of Jesus to pull him away from what he sees as a suicidal course.

Jesus turns his back on Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Imagine the disciples' stunned silence. Maybe they were thinking, "Whoa! What's Jesus talking about? Poor Pete, he really didn't deserve that." Peter must have been shocked. Just a few minutes ago Jesus was telling him how blessed he was and how important he was to Jesus' new community of faith. Now Peter is a stumbling stone instead of a building stone.

Jesus heard in Peter's well-intentioned words an echo of the tempter's voice. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Satan had tempted him to go some other way—to avoid the cross. Now he hears that temptation spoken in the protective words of a friend. Jesus had to reject the notion of avoiding the cross. His purpose, his goal, was Jerusalem. He was determined to go there to suffer and die and rise again. The plan must be fulfilled.

Jesus tells Peter, "Stop being an adversary and get behind me where you belong. It's your place to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way you would like me to go" (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*). Be a disciple, Peter. Follow me. And, Jesus goes on to say that being a disciple means denying ourselves, taking up a cross, and following him.

We've recently talked about the Passion of Jesus—the Last Supper, praying in the garden, his arrest, trial, torture, and execution. Remember Peter's part in that. When Jesus predicted that they would all abandon him, Peter protested and promised that he would stay with Jesus all the way to death. Jesus said that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed in the morning. When the mob came to arrest Jesus, Peter tried to protect him by swinging a sword. But Jesus rebuked him and healed the man whose ear Peter had cut off. Following at a distance, Peter came into the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was on trial inside. But Peter was recognized and challenged. Even his Galilean accent gave him away (Mt 26:73). And, as Jesus had said, three times Peter denied knowing him. Then

he heard the rooster crow, remembered the words of Jesus, and went out and wept bitterly. Simon at his worst.

On the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that Jesus' tomb was empty. Peter and, probably, John ran to see the tomb. Peter left, not knowing what to make of it. At some point that day, Jesus appeared to Peter. So he was the first of the Twelve to see the risen Lord (Lk 24:34). Peter was with the others during all those resurrection appearances. One was especially poignant—when Jesus again gave a miraculous catch of fish then cooked breakfast over a charcoal fire on the beach and asked Peter three times to reaffirm his love for Jesus. Jesus reclaimed Peter, restored him and recommissioned him, saying again, "Follow me." Simon Peter at his best, redeemed from his worst by the grace of Jesus.

Kenneth Wyatt says that his painting of Peter portrays him at the moment described in John 21:11, when the risen Jesus on the shore has called out to the disciples in the boat to cast out their nets for a catch—and suddenly the nets are full. Wyatt says that the model he used for Simon Peter was a man named Don Parker, who was born in MA, had been a professional motorcycle racer and had served in both the Navy and the Air Force. He was a muscular man of action, which is like Peter. Wyatt saw in him an explosive power, the power he wanted for this Big Fisherman (6).

If you read on into the book of Acts, you'll see Peter as the leader of the church, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaching powerfully, used in healing many people, being persecuted and delivered, and leading the way to ministry among non-Jewish people. Paul later describes a scene where Peter stood up for the Gentile believers, eating with them, until some strict Jewish believers arrived. Then he abandoned the Gentiles and only ate with Jews. Again we see the best and the worst in Simon Peter (Galatians 2:7-14).

Tradition tells us that Peter traveled as a missionary, eventually going to Rome. His name is on two New Testament letters. Tradition also tells us that Peter is the source for Mark's Gospel. He was martyred in Rome during the rule of Nero. He was forced to watch his wife be crucified. Then he was crucified. But, feeling that he was not worthy to die like his Lord did, he requested to be crucified upside down. So he did finally die for Jesus,

following him all the way to death, but with confidence in the power of Jesus' resurrection that defeats death.

Some of us need to learn from Peter to be a little more impulsive for Jesus and not hold back and analyze and evaluate everything before we speak for the Lord or act in his name. Some of us need to learn from Peter's mistakes and maybe be less impulsive. We can all be encouraged by Peter that Jesus loves us at our best and at our worst. He can take all that we are and use it all for his glory.

Lists of the Twelve Apostles

Matthew 10:2-4	Mark 3:16-19	Luke 6:14-16	Acts 1:13	Disciples named in John
Simon (Peter) Andrew James (son of Zebedee) John Philip Bartholomew Thomas Matthew the tax collector James (son of Alphaeus) Thaddaeus Simon the Zealot Judas Iscariot	Simon (Peter) James (son of Zebedee) John Andrew Philip Bartholomew Matthew Thomas James (son of Alphaeus) Thaddaeus Simon the Zealot Judas Iscariot	Simon (Peter) Andrew James John Philip Bartholomew Matthew Thomas James (son of Alphaeus) Simon the Zealot Judas (son of James) Judas Iscariot	Peter John James Andrew Philip Thomas Bartholomew Matthew James (son of Alphaeus) Simon the Zealot Judas (son of James) [Judas Iscariot was dead by this time]	Andrew Simon Peter Philip Nathanael Judas Iscariot Thomas Judas (not Iscariot) the sons of Zebedee

The Gospel of Mark describes how Jesus chose and appointed twelve of his disciples to be apostles, his commissioned representatives:

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. (Mk 3:13-15)

We are called. We come to Jesus. We are with him. He sends us, authorizes us and empowers us.

Dallas Willard is a contemporary writer who has done a lot to help us understand what being a disciple means. He says that the really good news is that Jesus is now taking students in

the master class of life. He emphasizes that we are somebody's disciple. We have learned how to live from somebody else, probably several somebodies. We can choose to follow Jesus and learn from him.

The assumption of Jesus' program for his people on earth was that they would live their lives as his students and co-laborers. They would find him so admirable in every respect—wise, beautiful, powerful, and good—that they would constantly seek to be in his presence and be guided, instructed and helped by him in every aspect of their lives.

...If I am Jesus' disciple that means I am with him to learn from him how to be like him.

He is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Revelation 1:5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14:2). He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life. (*The Divine Conspiracy*, pages xvii, 272-273, 276, 95)