

Peter: A Rocky Road

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: Acts 10:9-16; 34-35; Galatians 2:11-14; Matthew 16:13-23; 26:69-75

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

A gentleman visited a congregation on Sunday. He was quite taken with the service and really got into the sermon. He shouted "Amen," and a little later, "Hallelujah." People around him felt a bit uncomfortable, distracted, and some were annoyed. Then came the outburst of enthusiastic affirmation, "Amen, praise the Lord!" An usher approached the gentleman and tapped him on the shoulder, suggesting he restrain himself to which the man replied, "But, I got religion!," to which the usher replied, "Well, you didn't get it here!"

That is a humorous way of saying that there is a variety of religious experiences and there is a classic study of religion by the American philosopher William James. He delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1901-02, nearly a hundred years ago, and entitled his lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

This Eastertide season we are looking at several examples of religious experience and the insight or understanding that marks the respective expressions. I am particularly focusing on the variety aspect of religious experience today because, along with the celebration of Mother's Day, we broaden the focus to the Christian family and especially today, the welcoming of a group of young people who have completed a course of study about Christian faith and life as we understand it here.

We have called this moment of recognition *The Rite of Christian Identity*, a rite of passage which we mark here in their lives - and not only theirs, but others of our youth who may not have followed this particular path of group instruction and experience.

What we are doing is very intentional and it represents a significant change from the more traditional way we have viewed this moment in the past, a way that is still standard in most congregations. What we are doing is affirming our young people as members of this community of faith, this faith family, and encouraging them to assume responsibility for their ongoing faith journey along with us.

In our ritual, what we do symbolically is transfer the candle to their hands. As an infant in arms they receive the sign of belonging; they are family - we baptize them and a candle is given to parents as a sign that they belong and as a sign that parents can use to nurture them in the consciousness that they belong - to God - to the family of God. Now a candle is placed in their hands as a sign that the time has come for them to assume the responsibility to nurture their own flame of faith.

We have made two very significant changes as Christ Community. The first we made some years ago. Someone told me that at St. Peter's Church in Geneva, Switzerland, where John Calvin preached, the pastor baptized the infant and then asked the parents to speak vows of faithful nurture. This was just the opposite from our practice, which I think reflected the practice of most congregations - namely, asking the parents to speak their vows before baptizing the child.

Upon hearing of the practice at St. Peter's, I knew immediately that was the proper order, for it placed the baptism in the grace of God before any human intention or obligation. Sheer grace is bestowed in baptism; the child belongs because God claims the child - not because parents promise to be faithful.

The second change we are enacting this morning. The traditional way of receiving young people into the Church was through the personal profession of faith in God through Jesus Christ, which in recent years we called Confirmation. Confirmation is a good word; we may yet resurrect it. The idea of confirmation is that the promises spoken over the infant at baptism are confirmed as true in the life of the youth. That is not so different from what we are doing this morning with this significant change. Today, as their pastor, I am not saying, "Do you believe this and that?" "Will you promise this or that?" Today I simply welcome; I declare to them what is already, in fact, true: they belong. They are members of this community of faith.

Today I do not ask them to declare anything or step over some line. I do not call them to be converted, or to be saved, or whatever. Today we make one significant shift; we put the responsibility for spiritual growth and development in their own hands.

Not that we abandon them now. They continue to live in our love and our prayerful concern for their wellbeing. But, we face them with the fact that we have done what we could for them. Finally, there is no force-feeding in the Christian life. They are a vital part of this community; they belong. But how they live out their life and develop their spirituality is now shifted to them, to their determination.

These two significant changes are deeply rooted in our theological and biblical understanding. They are rooted, as well, in our understanding of human development.

Let me say a word about human development first. We have come to realize that these adolescent years are precisely the time young people do not need to be pressured to make a life decision. I do not claim to know much about developmental psychology, but this seems very clear to me; our young people in these tumultuous years with all the pressures of growing into young adulthood need to be embraced, included, assured and told quite clearly in word and ritual that they belong, that they are loved, respected, and cared for.

There was a time, and in most places it is still the practice, when what we did was draw a line and invite them to step over to join us by some faith profession. And what if they weren't sure intellectually, or secure emotionally? What if pressure of parent or pastor caused them to do it, but with some question or resistance? What if peer pressure said do it or peer pressure said don't do it? And what of those who resisted the pressure and did not go through the routine? Or, going through the routine, decided not to proceed?

All such considerations finally convinced us that this was not the time to put our sons and daughters through that kind of experience. Now is the time they need our warm, assuring embrace. That's what we do today.

You belong.

Theologically, I believe that is proper. These young people have in their baptism the sign and seal of God's Spirit. That is not a conditional promise with a time limit. There is no sunset clause connected with their being part of the family of God. A child baptized in infancy, nurtured in the biblical faith and Christian tradition cannot "join the Church." They *are* the Church. And I believe the best way to ensure their spiritual well-being is to let them know that, feel that, and to let them know that we are all together on a path of spiritual adventure and experience.

Toward what do we point them today? Toward the movement from secondhand to firsthand spiritual experience. In the Gifford Lectures of William James, to which I referred earlier, James distinguishes secondhand religious experience and firsthand religious experience. What is secondhand experience? Let me quote him:

I speak now of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. (Lecture I)

That is an insightful analysis. What can we say but that that is the description of most religious observance of most religious people: someone else's vision and awareness, transmitted over the generations by tradition, expressed in fixed forms which are imitated, ongoing through habit or custom. Secondhand religion

has its value; it has given structure to human existence as well as understanding and meaning to life. I suspect most of us who continue in religious observance do so in the secondhand variety.

But, there is something more; something richer and more compelling - there is firsthand religious experience, religious experience that consists of my own insight, conviction and passion. It is the difference between saying, "The tradition or the Church teaches," and "I believe, I am convinced!"

That it is to which we point our youth and, indeed, not only our youth, but all of us. For all of us the spiritual life is not a static set of beliefs and practices. If it is a vital part of our life, it is an ongoing adventure of fresh insight, deepening trust, sometimes the desert, the wilderness, the dark night of the soul. Sometimes a period of refreshing joy like the rain, rebirth.

It is not a matter of being saved or lost - or being lost until one is saved by repeating the right words and phrases or praying "the believers prayer." Spiritual life is a journey with highs and lows, sunshine and heavy skies, and in it all is the God Who embraces us and through it all we are never abandoned.

I think Peter is an example of the topsy-turvy ride of religious experience. In the Gospels, he seems to be the spokesperson for the disciples. In Matthew's Gospel there is a critical juncture in the 16th chapter - Jesus asks who the disciples think he is. Peter blurts out his confession,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven."

Then Jesus gives him a new name, or, perhaps better, a nick name. He calls him in Greek *Petros*, which is in the Greek language, "Rock." His father's name was Jonah or John. *Bar Jonah* means son of John or we would say, John's son, or simply Johnson. So, instead of being Simon Johnson, Jesus names him Rocky Johnson.

Was Jesus endeavoring to give to Simon a new identity - of being like a rock? And if so, was it because Simon was shaky? After the question, "Who do you say I am?" Jesus went on to tell of his suffering and again Peter jumps in, not at all sensitive to what Jesus was saying, denying it in fact, so that Jesus rebukes him.

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me ..."

From Rocky to Satan in one afternoon!

And then we read the story of Jesus' arrest and Peter's denial that he knew Jesus. Jesus had warned Peter of his proud presumption saying Peter would deny him three times and now Peter had done it - and he wept bitterly.

Of course, in John's Gospel, Peter is restored to service by Jesus, but it is interesting that when Jesus asks if Peter loves him, he uses the old name, Simon, son of John. Perhaps we shouldn't make too much of that, but it is interesting. The lessons from Acts and Galatians are simply further indication of the unsteadiness of Peter. He has a vision on the rooftop, the message of which is that nothing is unclean. The vision has to do with foods clean and unclean - the ritual food laws of Judaism, but the message has to do with the wiping out of the distinction between people - Jews and Gentiles.

Peter has the vision, is invited to the house of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, and realizes God's Spirit has been there before him. He gets the message:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.... Acts 10:34-35

Great insight, Peter.

Paul learned that, too, and he was preaching the Good News throughout Asia Minor. Peter visited him in the Galatian congregation and sat at table with the Gentiles - until some church visitors, Jewish Jesus folk from Jerusalem, arrived. Then Peter got up from the table of Jews and Gentiles and joined the Kosher only table.

I use these snapshots from the life of Peter simply to illustrate my contention this morning that the Christian life is a spiritual journey with peaks and pitfalls. It is uneven, knowing periods of passionate engagement and lean seasons when there is little joy or passion. If it was true of Peter - or, should I say, Rocky Johnson, it will be true for most of us sometime.

This is what I want our young people to know - that throughout their journey, whether it be faith's springtime or winter chill, God keeps them.

God was at your beginning,
God will be at your end,
and God will be with you . . In the meantime.

That is so critical to know, to believe. *You will hear other messages.* And maybe other approaches to the life of faith will move you and attract you. And that is fine. We are not all the same; we respond to a variety of approaches and appeals.

Reading the Saturday newspaper, I read an article about a March for Jesus to be held in this community and the nation this month. I am not inclined to be a part of that, not because Jesus is not for me the way, the truth and the life, but because I sense something in the movement that doesn't feel right to me. It is almost as though we need to hit the world over the head with Jesus. There is a militancy, a triumphalism about it that makes me uncomfortable. And that gives me occasion to say that the Grand Haven City Manager, Mr. Cotton, is absolutely right - constitutionally, of course, but even in terms of civility and sensitivity, in recommending that the cross be not raised on Dewey Hill in what is a national holiday. Thank God for our nation, our freedom, but do not connect cross and nation. It is to denigrate the cross, to identify its universality with a national celebration. That is sacrilege. Is that not part of what is happening in Kosovo and other points of conflict resulting in ethnic cleansing?

Again, are we so insecure that we must become so blatant?

Next month an evangelist, John Guest, will conduct an evangelistic crusade in Grand Haven and there will be a youth dimension as part of the crusade. There you will hear quite a different word than you've heard from me. John Guest is a friend, an honorable Christian leader. Some years ago he preached here and some of you knew and came to love him during the 60s when he carried on a beach ministry.

There will be a straightforward preaching of the traditional Gospel of salvation and an invitation to turn one's life over to Jesus, to be saved, to use the old language. And some of you just might need such a clear call and challenge. But, hear it as a further challenge on your spiritual journey, not as one lost in danger of hell.

I read the publication of a high school youth ministry in this area, First Priority, which also clearly distinguishes the saved from the lost and seeks to use the "saved kids" to win "the lost kids." Apparently they are successful. But, I wince at the easy classification of the saved and the lost. Who has a right to determine that, and on what basis?

Again, there are varieties of religious experience; different people respond to different approaches and appeals. I do not want to be understood this morning preaching against anyone or any organization. But, I do want to be clear with our own youth. I want the message of this community to be loud and clear because I do believe we offer an alternative variety of religious experience.

You belong.

God loves you.

God's grace includes you.

And you are invited to the rich spiritual adventure of living in this faith community and finding your own firsthand experience.

We have done what we can do. We have given you the ingredients of a secondhand religious experience. Now, with that as part of you, find your way to your own personal experience, knowing all the time you cannot fall out of the love of God.

And you will know when you are well on the way when the fruit of your life is marked by compassion, joy, peace, love, gentleness, kindness, and self control. You are beautiful.
We believe in you.
Find your way and know you will always be home here.