

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Sept. 3, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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What historical figure would you like to have dinner with?

You've probably heard that question at some point. It's used in job interviews. Johnny Carson ask his guests that question. Friends bring up the topic just to get a conversation started.

What historical figure would you like to have dinner with?

My great uncle, a lifelong baseball fan, always said that he wished he could have dinner with Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb and Mickey Mantle.

My high school English teacher wanted to have dinner with the Bronte sisters.

Based on my preaching, many of you may assume that I would want to have dinner with Elvis, Jesus, and a man from Newark, NJ, named Tom Porcello - the inventor of the Oreo cookie!

That would be an interesting dinner, indeed! But there is one more person I would like to have dinner with – and that is Saint Peter.

There is something about Saint Peter that makes me feel connected to him.

Think about Peter. He was born into an ordinary family. He worked hard just to make ends meet.

He didn't sit behind a desk. He took his fishing boat out onto the unpredictable waters of the Sea of Galilee, and he pulled heavy nets out of the water.

After a long day at work, he came home with his muscles sore, probably smelling of fish and sweat.

He was married. I sometimes wonder : when Peter got home from work, did his wife greet him at the door and say, "you're not coming into the house smelling like that! Take a bath!" Did he and his wife have a good relationship? Did they argue?

He also had a mother in law. Did THEY argue?

A family guy from northern Israel, just trying to make it through life...

Then... he met Jesus. And he started to listen to Jesus. And he followed Jesus. And as he followed Jesus, we learn something else about Peter. He had an incredible knack for putting his foot in his mouth.

In other words, Peter often blurted things out before he thought them through. He said some foolish things! (Let's just stop there – can any of US identify with that? Are we ever like St. Peter when it comes to speaking without thinking?)

So, Peter could be the patron saint of those who say things they later regret.

But it is also clear that, on a deep level, Peter is *listening*. He is listening to Jesus. And, on a deep level, Peter understands who Jesus is and what he wants.

Last week and this week we are hearing a crucial moment in the Gospel of Matthew, and it is a crucial moment in the friendship between Jesus and Peter.

Last week, we heard how Jesus asked his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” And the disciples gave their reports.

But when Jesus changed the question and asks, “who do YOU say that I am?” Peter blurts out, “You are the Christ. The Son of the Living God!” And he was right! Peter *gets it*. He understands.

Jesus pats Peter on the back and says, “You’re right Peter. And from now on you are the rock on which I will build my church!” How’s that for a compliment from the Messiah?!? You can almost see Jesus smiling at his friend.

But the smile doesn’t last long. Because Jesus clarifies something for Peter, and everyone else who. He explains that he is not going to be the kind of messiah that many people were expecting.

He’s not going to be a military strong man or a political genius. Rather, he is headed to Jerusalem to suffer and die. That is God’s plan for the Messiah: *to enter into human suffering*.

Then Peter blurts out – “God forbid!” In effect, Peter is saying, “What a dumb plan! That’s not going to happen to you!”

Just minutes before, Jesus had said to Peter, “You’re the rock on which I will build my church!” Now Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me Satan.” How would you like your best friend to call you Satan? How would you feel if Jesus called you Satan?

Just minutes before, Jesus called Peter the rock on which the church would be built. Now Jesus is calling Peter a rock in the path that causes people to trip.

Peter basically said that God's plan is a bad plan. He can't understand why God would do things THIS way. Why does it have to include suffering? Why does life have to be hard? Can't we do it another way?

And don't we have moments like that, too? Moments where we just don't understand why things are happening the way they're happening. Moments where we say to God, "I know you have a plan, but I don't like the way it's unfolding. Couldn't you have done this an easier way?"

Jesus invites Peter, and us, to trust God's plan.

And don't forget: when Jesus is on trial, Peter will be the one who denies that he even *knows* Jesus. But after the resurrection, Jesus forgives Peter and reminds him, "you still have a job to do."

As I look at the friendship between Jesus and Peter, one thing strikes me: *Jesus never gave up on Peter, and Peter never gave up on Jesus.* Isn't that the hallmark of true friendships, and true faith?

There were times when Jesus would have been perfectly justified in saying to Peter, "you're driving me crazy! Why don't you understand? How could you deny that you knew me?"

But our savior is persistent and passionate about loving his friends and his followers – even when we don't fully understand, even when we are not fully faithful, even when our words and deeds are acts of betrayal. We have a Lord who never gives up on us.

And Peter never gives up on Jesus. Is Peter confused at times? Yes. Does Peter struggle with God's wisdom and God's ways? Yes. Does Peter get it right sometimes and wrong other times? Yes.

Like so many people throughout history, Peter could have said to Jesus, "I like you, but your Gospel is too demanding. Following you requires too much change in me. Being your disciple requires too much *carrying of the cross.*"

Peter could have said to Jesus, "Why can't you give us an easy way to heaven, instead of all of this talk about the cross?" But Peter didn't give up on Jesus. And when the Roman authorities crucified Peter upside down as a punishment for his faith, maybe it was then, in that moment,

that Peter understood why Jesus kept talking about the cross.

Because the cross – senseless suffering – comes to every person’s life. And when those moments come, we, who follow Jesus, discover that our crucified friend and savior is right there with us.

Senseless suffering is happening to people *today*. And they may be tempted to give up -

- + In Houston, where a hurricane has wiped away 100,000 homes.
- + In Iraq and Syria, where Christians and people of every faith are caught in the crosshairs of ongoing war.
- + In Haiti, where people have to walk miles just to find drinking water.
- + In neighborhoods close to us, where people feel crushed by the weight of poverty and the lingering evil of racism.
- + In hospitals, where illness has suddenly come upon a loved one without warning. + In families and individual lives, where the cross is handed to us with no time to prepare.

No matter who we are or what we’ve done, Jesus will not give up on us.

Sometimes, our struggles leave us blurting out to God, “What’s the plan? Why is this so hard? When will this make sense?”

In those moments, don’t give up on the Lord. Rather, remember Peter. Peter, who kept listening to Jesus, learning from Jesus, and loving Jesus. Peter would tell you, ‘don’t ever give up on God. Just come to God’s table, and be strengthened by the meal.’