

## **"The Peter Principle"**

Gordon Wiersma 9/16/12

There are “you know where you were when...” moments in life – events of such significance that you always remember the time and place that you first heard the news. That’s the kind of moment 9/11 has become in American culture. This past Tuesday, September 11, when I saw some replays of the 2001 coverage, I could clearly recall where I was as I watched those horrific events unfold. It’s often those kinds of public tragic events that make such a mark on us – JFK, MLK, Challenger; but it’s the case with shared achievements and celebrations too – a man on the moon, a new millennium marked. Those are “you know where you were when...” moments for many people – some for you, I imagine, some for me. And we each have our own personal “where and when moments” too – times of tragic or triumphant news, of loss or of joy that mark us deeply.

I have a “I know where I was when...” moment to share that has to do with this Gospel passage we read – and it’s a bit of an odd fit with my examples of tragedy or joy that I’ve given...but I’ll get back around to that connection eventually. The way this event does fit in my mind is the significant impact this particular moment had on me – how it did and has continued to shape me: it was a sermon preached on this passage, by the great Presbyterian preacher Fred Craddock at my Princeton Seminary graduation in 1989 – one of the most profound sermons I’ve ever heard – I can remember it like yesterday. I mentioned this three years ago when I preached on this story from Mark, and if anyone wants to start keeping track, I think it will happen every time this lection lands on my preaching plate. Craddock preached on the temptation of the church to try to survive, rather than being willing to give its life – it struck me that day as a wisdom and insight that I have continued to reflect on ever since, which I did in the sermon three years ago (a sermon that if you heard I’m sure was a “remember where & when” moment in your life ☺).

What I want to do with the story is continue to use that lens I received from Craddock – and as I come back to and delve into this story, this is what it allows me to see: the tendency to receive an essential truth but then use it in a way that undermines that very truth. You can call it a tendency or a temptation, but the person at the center of it is Peter – and so I've decided to call it the Peter Principle (I am aware that the Peter Principle is already a term used in organizations – for people being promoted until they reach a position of incompetence – and that's fine. But this has nothing to do with that. This is my own Peter Principle that I am making up – it fits the story and has nice alliteration – so don't think of that other one). The Peter Principle: to receive an essential truth but then use it in a way that undermines that very truth. That's what we find here with Peter – and I do love that Peter is such a fine stand-in for all of us in so many Gospel stories, someone for us to identify with – he earnestly tries to get things right, but also often gets things wrong; has a good heart, but often speaks before he thinks – and that's all here in this story. It's a roller coaster for Peter: when Jesus asks the disciples "who do you say that I am?", Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah – this is THE right answer, Peter is the best...this is the central affirmation of the whole Gospel – YES!; when Jesus then speaks of his path to suffering and death, Peter rebukes Jesus – this is THE wrong thing to do, Peter is the worst – Satan! – utterly refuted...oh no! And then...Peter (star & satan) is called to follow – which is the remarkable end to the story we need to get to too...

But first let's look how we get there, with the Peter Principle – having a truth but then having it go wrong. And I don't want to present this with some sort of superior tone, looking down on Peter for his errant ways – I really do see Peter as a stand-in for us, as an insight into the same tendency and temptation present in our lives as people of faith – and the same possibility too. And so the first thing to see is the truth – it's the thing to receive, to affirm, to

celebrate. Peter says about/to Jesus: “You are the Messiah.” This is a remarkable statement, a startling truth for Peter to express. This truth says, means, that in this particular person Jesus, the God of eternity is uniquely present to fulfill the promises of God to the world. Obviously that’s my own wording, but I think it’s a fair sense of the essence of what is contained in this moment – this acclamation and affirmation by Peter. I think it was for him and the disciples, and Jesus, a “remember where and when” moment of the profound and blessed variety – a time that marks and shapes them deeply.

So with this truth illuminating them all, what Jesus says next is that he will suffer and be rejected and be killed, and will rise again. Peter says NO! In Peter’s mind the truth about who Jesus is, cannot go together with what Jesus is saying. Peter rebukes Jesus – does Jesus get it wrong two weeks in a row?! Nope – Peter gets it wrong...but let’s understand why – which will help us understand why we right along with our brother Peter can get it wrong too.

There is this truth of Jesus as the Messiah in view, front and center – so instead of what Jesus said, what might Peter recommend? Well, there is this truth – and in some way, doesn’t that make you important, to have this truth? We won’t say BETTER, exactly, but I could see Peter wanting to respect the magnitude of this truth by focusing on how important it makes Jesus, and his followers too... You have this truth, so I could see Peter thinking it should be managed in such a way that maximizes how it reaches people, in a way that is appealing – that would be a good focus. You have this truth – it is important that you take care of it – manage it – use it – and that important people do this...Peter has some fine ideas, I’m sure.

These ideas do not include suffering, rejection, death – Peter says NO! – Jesus says SATAN! Things have gotten away from Peter altogether. So what does it mean when you call one of your entourage Satan? (I personally recommend you use this term sparingly.) Well, Satan represents, embodies the

ultimate sabotage of God's will and ways. We think of Satan as evil – yes – but the insidious power of Satan expressed here is as the great deceiver – as twisting, misdirecting, diverting from God's ways in often subtle ways. Peter has the truth – but what it means is something entirely different than what Peter concludes. What Jesus says is that the truth of Jesus being the Messiah means that there is a God who comes to embrace the brokenness of this world – it means that Jesus MUST suffer, not because of a transaction Jesus must fulfill, but because for God to come fully into and redeem human history is for Jesus to face head on that this is a world ruled by violence – a world in which seeking God's ways is opposed by violence. Peter thought that truth was something you were right about, and wanted to figure out how to manage it – but that is deadly – Satan. Jesus says truth is something that is embodied, lived – made real in entering into the brokenness of life, AND in true life, risen life emerging from that place.

Alright – so here's what I'm thinking about: September 11 reactions – a decade of grief and of war in response – the killing of Osama bin Laden – a political convention cheers wildly that bin Laden is dead; what do I do with those things as a Christian? This week, a “Christian” video mocking the prophet Mohammed and Islam – in reaction “Islam” protests of violence and death, spreading throughout the Muslim world; what do I do with those things as a Christian? And today at Hope Church, a 2<sup>nd</sup> week of adult ed about Islam, and other religions to follow – the course is called “Understanding: Learning from Other Faiths”; what do I think about that as a Christian?

In this gospel story, Peter called out the truth, and then he is called Satan, and then, he is called by Jesus – Peter is part of the group Jesus calls together to hear this call: to deny self, and take up the cross, to give your life, and in so doing to find it – which is, to do as God has done in Christ, to bring the promises of God to the world by entering into the brokenness of the world.

Peter getting Messiah right, and then getting it all wrong, didn't change that Jesus called him. And Peter as our stand-in helps us to see our place too – we can be affirmed in the truth of the Messiah, and then we can be Satan too – hope that's not too shocking for you – but we sabotage that truth too, by placing ourselves in charge of it, rather than listening to the call. The wisdom – the wisdom of God that calls to us from the streets – the wisdom to be heard for us here is this: truth of the Messiah is not about being right, truth is being called by the Messiah – called by God to give our lives to the way of Christ – reconciling the world to the promises of God by entering into the brokenness of the world.

The church, we, need to be called again and again to see how we may be sabotaging the way of the Messiah by trying to control it – and know that in all our failures, Jesus still calls us – a call of the cross that will indeed look and sound like this: listening to neighbors and faiths and lives with a desire for learning and respect; rejecting violence, whether religious or political or social, as the way of Satan that will destroy us all; responding to terror not just as citizen of the United States but as a follower of Jesus Christ, believing that even in what is deadly, Jesus can show us from there a path of life – a belief in resurrection – not just once, but the way of resurrection that enters again and again into brokenness, believing God will bring life. Our place is not the place of right and importance and privilege and separation – ours is the place of division and need and pain: there the truth of Messiah resides – the gifts and grace of God to bring life. Instead of the Peter Principle, here is a Wisdom Principle: the truth of the Messiah is not so much a belief we do something with, as it is a reality that does something to us – reached by our God; called into brokenness; witnesses to the promise of life. That is wisdom for this past week, and whatever comes this week, and our whole lives through – AMEN.