



Reflection for June 30, 2020

The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29th)

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. . . .

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, [Ezekiel 34:1, 16]

'Do you love me? . . . Feed my sheep.' [John 21:17]

We commemorate the lives of Peter and Paul separately in January, but this week we commemorate their shared martyrdom, probably in Rome under the emperor Nero in 64. This commemoration is particularly timely this year because it reminds us that even the most fundamental differences within the church are less important than the Christ-centered commitment to justice and trust in God that we share.

I smile at this feast and at the icons that have been created in response to it because Peter and Paul, and the groups they led, were very competitive and fundamentally disagreed about the direction of growth for the early church. Indeed, they could hardly have been more different in their approach to leading the early followers of Jesus: Peter the simple fisherman, Paul the scholar; Peter preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, Paul preaching to non-Jews throughout the known world; Peter an intimate companion to Jesus during his ministry, Paul a follower after the resurrection.

But together they teach us three indispensable lessons about being followers of Christ today.

1. **Forgiveness & Repentance:** Both Peter and Paul were forgiven for shocking deeds of betrayal. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus three times after Jesus was arrested and faced torture and death. Paul led the persecution of the early Christians with fierce and single-minded cruelty. Both turned away from their past and changed their lives in ways that could not have been predicted. Peter's sermons recorded in the Book of Acts passionately exhort the citizens of Jerusalem to face the fact that they abandoned Jesus and called for his crucifixion. Paul's sermons and letters are often passionate, often tender, and often doctrinaire calls for recognizing the transformational truths of the resurrection and of God's mercy. Both Peter and Paul, in their very different ways, show that we cannot predict who we will become. As we grow, so does both our self-understanding and our wonder at God's ways. Whether we look back on paths we might have taken, or we look ahead to paths that will

inevitably diverge, Peter and Paul teach us to take responsibility for our choices and to seek God's mercy with confidence and awe.

2. **The need for head and heart in faithful living:** The wonderful icon of an illiterate fisherman (wearing the keys to the church) standing beside a scholar holding manuscripts reminds us that faith requires both study and action, both an open mind and an open heart. They are necessary components of both an individual life and the communal life of the church. We need to be a church that guides people to be both students and activists; we need to take time to learn from books and to practice what we have learned; we need to be steeped in our tradition and open to new interpretations of it. It is only with head and heart that we will discover the wondrous and unexpected ways of the living God.

3. **Wholeness will overcome division in the Church** – This commemoration of Peter and Paul reminds us that we are one church, and our divisions will someday be seen as part of a beautiful design of contrasting patterns. These two leaders could not have been more different; however, they ultimately revealed the light of Christ that they shared. The church has faced many divisions through the ages; today is no different. But Peter and Paul together teach us to pay attention to the Christ we preach and follow and in whom we are joined, body to body, heart to heart, soul to soul.

Reflecting on the lives and deaths of these two men, I have been reminded of the wise words of Reinhold Niebhor:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

As we face our own doubts, humbled by how often we have been obtuse in clinging to our own vision of the world, discouraged by how often we have missed the mark, may Peter and Paul be beacons of hope and humility. May they remind us that we have been forgiven, that we have much to learn from those who are different from us, and that, blessed with forgiveness, we can indeed transform barriers into bridges.

Prayer by Daniel J. McGill (*All will be Well*, p. 107)

May those who doubt, trust in their doubt.

May those who cannot believe, trust in their disbelief.

May those who are tempted, trust their temptation.

May those who are alone, trust their aloneness.

May those who are abandoned, trust their abandonment.

*May those who are desolate, trust in their desolation,
For by this prayer alone, all darkness is presented to you, O God.
And as you lead the lost so may you lead them by means of that which they do not possess
To that which they despair ever to find.
May your truth enlighten all paths, and bring courage to all fears.*