

Leadership is a widely celebrated quality in our culture. Our educational institutions love to train leaders and to honor the success of their alumni. Companies applaud and reward their best leaders, whose minds and spirits forge new pathways, sell products, and make money for boards and stakeholders. Leadership qualities like initiative, innovative thinking, risk-taking, and analytical skills fill countless resumes. We have a mixed sense of both fear and admiration for out of the box thinkers and mavericks, such as Bill Gates, Jeff Besos, Elon Musk, & when he was alive, Steve Jobs. We know that for all of their business acumen and charisma, they can also be sometimes petulant and over-the-top competitive.

We need these kinds of people to stand ground on important issues, to invent and dream, to have the guts to forge new paths, to defend their turf, and to motivate others. But even leaders need a rein to keep them from veering off into their own uncharted territory. Even leaders need an anchor.

The relationship we see in the scriptures between Jesus and Peter is an interesting one. Sometimes volatile, often outspoken, occasionally pushy, but loyal to the bone, Peter is a rough around the edges character. He's got a fisherman's mouth, a protector's spirit, and an adversarial personality, but he's also loyal to the bone. Jesus knows this. That's why he picked him.

Peter is the one who steps out front to defend the disciples on the Sea of Galilee when they think they see a ghost coming toward them on the water. Peter is the one who leaps at the man coming to put Jesus under arrest, slicing off his ear in his anger and protective impulsivity.

Peter is the one who pledges to Jesus when everyone else starts to desert him, and the others follow suit. Peter is the "voice," the "leader" of Jesus' disciples. He's strong. He's able. He's no doubt formidable. And he's a bit loud.

He's the one with the courage to challenge the status quo and put Jesus' words and teaching into real time action. He's the one you want out front when you're being attacked, because he's a ferocious foe. He's the one you want on your side, because he could be an overwhelming force if he's not. He's the one with the body of a bear and the temper of a lion, but inside he's got the heart of a lamb. He's courageous. Daring. Even impulsive. But he's like a bodyguard to Jesus. He's never going to let anything happen to his team or his Lord.

Jesus needed someone like Peter to take the lead among the twelve. He would need someone like this to set the foundation for the early church. Peter the rock would be able to do it, and Jesus knew that. He had all of the attributes of a ferocious leader. But for him to do it God's way and not his own way would be the focus of Jesus' mentorship of Peter from the beginning to the end of his ministry.

By the time we see Peter being reinstated by Jesus on the shores of Galilee after Jesus' resurrection, Peter, while still a force to be reckoned with, has gained a humility and deference to Jesus that is instantly recognizable.

In our scripture for today however, we see the volatile Peter. The sometimes out-of-control Peter. The not yet fully spiritually formed Peter. And instead of defending Jesus, he's arguing with him. If any of you have tried in the past to argue with God, you know it's probably not your best approach. Although God will always listen to us and can bear the brunt of our tantrums, it won't affect God's decisions, God's mission, God's love for others, or God's plans. Jonah learned that the hard way too!

The scene in our scripture today begins with a discussion about identity. Who is Jesus really? It's clear that Peter leads the disciples in answering: "You are the Christ."

At that, Jesus begins to explain what that means. And his explanation is not what the disciples expect. No doubt, they expected Jesus to begin strategizing the take-over of Jerusalem, or the fall of Rome, changes in rulership, perhaps even a revolution. What did it mean for him to be "the messiah?" They thought they knew. Peter was sure he knew.

When Jesus explained that the Human One would suffer and be rejected, then be killed, and then rise from the dead, Peter not only opposed Jesus, but he grabbed him, he began talking him down, arguing and defying him, trying to correct him.

"How can you say something like that!" Peter may have said. "We are not going to let that happen!" most likely said the defensive & protective Peter. "Stop talking nonsense," he may have exclaimed. "This is not what we signed up for," Peter may have asserted.

Jesus puts Peter in his place with one of the most powerful phrases we hear him use with his own disciples: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

Let's look at this phrase for a moment. "Get behind me!"

Not in front of me, not in my face, not ahead of me, not equal to me. Peter, you are out of line. Your role is not to lead me. I am your Lord. I am the Christ. Your role is to follow me. Get therefore out from in front of me. And get behind me! Literally, and figuratively.

Because following me also means getting behind (supporting) MY teaching, supporting MY mission, which is God's mission, defending MY direction, my path, and encouraging, not discouraging or disparaging, what I need to do to bring God's plan to fruition. In other words, your petulance right now is a stumbling stone to my mission. How that must have stung!

That Shepherd's rod must have stung not only Peter's pride but his ego. We don't hear another word for a while from Peter, who I imagine in that moment realized his error and quietly in humility and deference, got behind his Lord.

Would he have other moments when his own desires and imaginings for a future kingdom would look differently than those of Jesus? Sure. Would he lose his cool and act out again in the future? We know he did. Would he after Jesus' death go on to become a leader in the movement called the Way and help to establish the spread of the early church? He sure did.

You see, we realize more than ever in this scripture today that being a disciple is not a simple decision. It's a journey of learning. God chooses no perfect people. God chooses able people...able people with the capacity and willingness to learn how to carry on Jesus' mission in the world in a powerful but loving way.

Being a follower of Jesus is about a tension of opposites. WE need to be courageous and loyal, but also a wise servant. We need to be ferocious as a lion. But gentle as a lamb. We need to be a leader. But also know that we too are followers and can only lead others well to the extent that Jesus is leading you.

Being a follower or disciple of Jesus is not about "getting it all right." It's not about never having faults or avoiding mistakes. Peter makes them all the time, as do we. But he makes them boldly. He is who he is, and he doesn't apologize for it. You always know where Peter stands, because he is always all out there. He's honest and authentic. But Peter is also called the rock of the church because his strongest quality is in the end not his leadership, but his humility and his faith.

Sometimes we mistake strength of personality for strength of spirit. But they are not the same. You can be a quiet person and be a formidable force of faith. You can change the world with a still, small voice. Or you can be like Peter – a loud and boisterous presence with a loyal and humble heart of gold and an unwavering faith.

God needs all of you to create the kind of kingdom God has in mind. Get behind Jesus.

For when Jesus leads the church, anything can happen, and I'll wager it will.

On this 20th Anniversary of the attacks on the Twin Towers I'd like us to think about how it affects us as followers of Jesus, and with our siblings in other faith traditions, we place great value on the act of remembrance. We remember many loved ones lost and first responders who put their lives at risk, modeling the sacrificial love of Jesus, who said: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

While 20 years have passed, I also want us to pause and remember the days that followed these tragic events. There was a moment in the aftermath when people came together. We were praying, grieving, and also *working* together. Because in that moment, however fleeting it was, we knew with immediacy and vulnerability that we need God, and we need each other.

Memories of that tender cooperation—of love for each other as neighbors—serve as guiding lights for the present. Amidst the ongoing pandemic and natural disasters that have taken so many lives and pushed first responders to their limits, and amidst a worldwide reckoning with the sin of racism, we are called to become the Beloved Community whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love. Amen.