

**"The Lord of Second Chances"**  
**Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**April 18, 2010**  
**Texts: Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

It's time for Bible trivia. I know you are full of excitement. Don't worry, it won't be too tough. Are you ready for the question? Here it is: After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, who were the two main figures in the spread of Christianity? Whom do we hear about most in the book of Acts, the historical account in the New Testament that chronicles the growth of the Church? If you guessed Peter and Paul, you are right.

What do we know about Peter during the ministry of Jesus? Besides being the patron saint for all of us who are hard headed and slow learners about some things, here is some additional information about him. Peter was one of the first disciples called; he always stands first in the lists of disciples contained in the Gospels; he also was one of the three (along with James and John) who formed an inner circle around Jesus. Peter was the one disciple who first recognized that Jesus was the Christ, God's Chosen One, the Messiah, though Peter didn't have a clue as to what that meant prior to Jesus' death.

After Jesus' ministry, Peter became the leader of the apostles. He gave the first Christian sermon at Pentecost and afterwards, he was the principal preacher, the spokesman before the Jewish authorities, and the chief executive in the administration of discipline. Though the Church as a whole made a deep impression on the community, it was to Peter in particular that supernatural powers were attributed.

He exercised the same leadership in Samaria, the Church's first mission field. Significantly also, he was the first apostle to be associated with the Gentile mission. It is to Peter that Paul went to obtain information about Jesus' life and ministry, and Peter came to Paul's defense at the Jerusalem Council to urge the full acceptance of the Gentiles into the Church on the basis of their faith alone. Like Paul, Peter eventually undertook missionary work in Palestine and in North Asia Minor.

That's a lot of what we know about Peter. What about Paul? What do we know about him? Paul became the primary missionary to the Gentiles, and his travels took him all the way from Antioch to Spain. He established churches as he went, and his epistles (letters) were written to provide additional instruction to these congregations. Paul was the church's first theologian, taking the tradition about Jesus that circulated in the early Church, interpreting it, and applying it to

new situations. Most of our New Testament is the result of Paul's own writings and the writings developed by the "school" that succeeded him. Many of our theological concepts and much of our terminology regarding faith come from Paul's writings.

For example, he explained that our salvation comes as a result of justification by grace alone through faith alone. He stressed the fact that salvation is a process, not only an instantaneous event, so that after we have been justified, we must be sanctified as well, growing in grace by becoming more and more Christlike through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He showed us that the Church is the Body of Christ. We understand what God did in Christ, that is, reconciled the world unto himself, because of what Paul wrote.

In other words, to summarize, Peter and Paul became the significant figures, the major dudes, the main men in the early Church. And they both were martyred for their faith, that is, they both died because of what they did for Jesus and the early Church.

The point is not, however, how they ended up. We know that they both made incomparable contributions to the Church, so much so that it is hard to imagine the development of the Church without them. They were monumental instruments of God's purpose. The point is, rather, how they started out. They finished wonderfully, marvelously, terrifically. But their beginnings were rather dismal.

You will recall that Peter, as great a disciple as he was, denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest and trial. This outspoken "rock" turned out to be a coward when the chips were down. Paul, when he was still known as Saul, was the leader in the persecution of Christians. He witnessed the stoning of Stephen, the first deacon appointed in the early Church and its first martyr. What happened that turned these "bad guys" into "good guys"? Two of the lectionary passages of scripture for today tell the story. You heard them read earlier.

*Both Peter and Paul were given second chances by Jesus.* Peter had failed to stand by his Lord in his hour of need, yet Christ reinstated him. Just as he had denied Jesus three times, Peter was given three opportunities to express his love for the Lord. He did, and Jesus commissioned him to do his ministry, to "feed my sheep," as Christ told him. Paul was confronted by a vision of the exalted Lord, who asked Paul why he was persecuting him. It is the Damascus Road experience that turned the persecuting Saul into the preaching Paul.

The message in the example of both Peter and Paul is simply this: *Our Lord is the Lord of second chances.* We don't have to get it right the first time. It would be great if we did, we would be better off if we did, but we are not required to do so. We can mess up and still be okay with God. That is what grace means. God lets us begin again.

When I was a student at Perkins and taking systematic theology under Schubert Ogden, I had to write a "credo," just as all theology students at Perkins are required to do. I based my "credo" on Paul's theology. His whole conception of Christ is of him as the second Adam. Through the first Adam, sin and death entered the world. Through the second Adam, Christ, salvation comes into the world.

That means that we have a choice of being in solidarity with the first Adam or with the second Adam. We need to understand, however, that the "in Adam all" die, while the "in Christ all" live. In other words, the *person and work of Christ represent God's second chance to all of creation*. Through Jesus, everyone gets a chance to quit living in and like Adam and to start living in and like Christ.

Do you need a second chance in some area of your life? I can think of several areas where that might be the case. What about in your marriage? Could you use a second chance to deal with some issue, to communicate better, to work a little harder on a healthy relationship? How about in your parenting? Could you use a second chance to express to your children more intentionally your love for them? Could you use a second chance to model appropriate behavior more effectively to your kids?

How about with your friends? Could you use another chance to convey to them their significance for your life? Could you use another

chance to forgive and forget and allow healing to take place in some relationship? How about your priorities in life? Could you use a second chance to adjust them a little differently so that you spend more time, more money, and more creativity doing those things that really matter?

What about with respect to your prejudices? Could you use a second chance to begin to see the value, the dignity, and the worth of every person, no matter how different from you he or she may appear to be? What about your actions toward people in need? Could a second chance allow you to be used by God as an instrument of his love and care to the underprivileged in our community and beyond?

Perhaps most importantly, what about your relationship with yourself? Could you use a second chance to forgive yourself, to begin to feel realistically good about yourself, and to see yourself as the lovable and capable child of God you truly are? Could you use a second chance to quit feeling guilty, inadequate, and depressed? Could you use a second chance to appropriate the love of God, to take God's grace seriously enough to see yourself more as God sees you than as you have gotten used to seeing yourself?

Grace means having a second chance, and a third, and a fourth, and so on. Our God is a gracious God, a merciful God, a forgiving God. Our God is in the second chance business. He's the CEO of DO-OVER, Incorporated. His advertising firm wrote the tagline: "If at first you

don't succeed—try, try again." God will give you as many chances as you need to realize that you are his child and as many chances as you need to live like it. Peter and Paul both were given second chances to follow Jesus and to serve as his representatives. We are given that same chance. We can choose to follow and serve the Lord, or we can choose not to. It is my prayer that you will take God up on his offer to give you the chance to follow and serve him and in so doing, find authentic and abundant life.

When I was at Baylor, there was a song that was used as the theme for a "Jesus Is" rally. It is a song that has stuck with me ever since. The words to the chorus are these:

Welcome back to Jesus; it's good to see you home.  
The brothers and the sisters have been here all along.  
We've been waiting for you, brother,  
And now we're close to tears,  
To see you coming home again, the answer to our prayers.

God in Christ will give you a second chance. God wants to see you come home again and stands ready to welcome you back whenever you do. God wants to extend grace to you wherever in your life you need it. The Lord wants to give you whatever second chance you need. Why not give him the chance to prove it?