

September 3, 2023
Lectionary 22, Year A
The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Examples and Saints

Over the past two weeks, I have had the privilege and the sorrow of preaching and presiding at the funerals of three of our church members, three pillars of our congregation, two women and one man whose commitment, faith, and efforts on behalf of Emmanuel have helped our congregation thrive over the decades. We stand on their legacy. Legacies of showing up when needed, legacies of sharing their talents and gifts.

Our church is more beautiful and many sick and grieving spirits have been comforted because Eleanor shared her talents at handcrafts with us in so many ways, in decorations around the church, in baptismal towels cross-stitched and embellished, in prayer shawls knit.

Our church building is stronger because Paul shared his architectural talents with us. Our church fellowship is stronger because he helped to get people together, because he helped our congregation to love one another.

Evie, helped us to make a joyful noise as a congregation, singing in the choir for more than 63 years. She showed up for things like the rummage sale, the altar guild, fellowship meals, and worship on Zoom. She showed up for fellowship and fun. She showed up for the Piecemakers, being a part of making so many quilts over the years.

She, with Eleanor and many others, helped to make the beautiful 100th anniversary quilt that hangs in our hallway, a reminder of who we were and who we are and who we will be, who we can be, when faithful people share their talents, and work together to create something beautiful.

In the days leading up to their funerals I spent time with their family members, listening to the stories about them, the way that they lived, the way that they loved, the fun they had, the joy they shared. And in those stories, I heard echoes of Paul's words in our reading from Romans today, words that give us an ethic for what it means to be a Christian, of how Christians are called to live. Hear these words from Paul's letter to the Romans:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:9-18)

What a beautiful picture of what it means to walk through the world as a follower of Jesus. What a beautiful picture of what it means to live in Christian community together. What a lofty ethic to live by. What a calling. Even to be invited to live in such a way is a gift. Being empowered to do it, by the Holy Spirit, is such an outpouring of grace, it's almost impossible to describe.

And if you listened to the families of our beloved saints, whose funerals we celebrated in the last few weeks, it might seem that they achieved it, that they indeed lived by this ethic. If you looked at the tears of their family and friends, if you heard their laughter and saw their smiles at the memories, if you looked at the

pictures their family chose to represent their lives, all that they did, and more importantly, those who they loved, if you listened to their stories and heard me preach, in an attempt make them live through words, if you heard about the promises that they trusted, then you heard about people who were genuine in love, expressed in many ways, people who were honorable, people who were hopeful, generous, welcoming, faithful. People it was a gift to know.

But I have to wonder if there might have been some people out there, who heard those funeral sermons and the tributes offered by family, who saw all of those pictures of lives so well lived and thought, “I wonder if I measure up.” What if I’m not those things, or at least not all the time? What if I pale in comparison? What if I can’t live up to this dear one’s lofty example? What if, even on a good day, I’m not sure if I’m loving enough, honorable enough, genuine enough, passionate enough, faithful enough, generous enough, prayerful enough, forgiving enough, peaceful enough?

What will people say about me when I die? What will be remembered? The good moments, the bad moments, all of it, none of it? What will my legacy be?

If you’ve ever thought like that, this week or last week at funerals, or at any time in your life, well, then, it’s a blessing that we, who have Eleanor, Paul, and Evie in our lives, also have Peter.

Because Peter is a reminder that we don’t always get it right. And Peter’s life is a reminder that Jesus doesn’t love us because we’re perfect. Jesus loves us because he’s Jesus, What a relief.

If you attended worship with Emmanuel last Sunday, you heard me preach about what’s called Peter’s confession of faith. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter jumped right in with the perfect answer. “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16)

It was a great moment in Peter’s life. He made his statement of faith and Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not

revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:17-18) It was a great moment. It had to be one of the greatest moments in Peter’s life. He got it right, he said the right thing, he was faithful enough, passionate enough. His love was genuine, he did not lag in zeal.

But that wasn’t the end of Peter’s story. Last week I told you that last Sunday’s gospel reading was a cliffhanger, there was more to the story. And today we heard in the gospel reading, what came next.

Jesus was telling his disciples what it meant for him, that he was the Son of God, that he was the Messiah. And what he was telling them was not what they wanted or expected to hear. Instead of telling them about glory about to be revealed, instead of telling them about victory over the Romans, instead about telling them about earthly fame and success, Jesus started telling them that he was going to suffer and die. He also told them that he was going to rise from the dead on the third day, but they never really seem to pick up on that. I mean, really, until Jesus made resurrection a thing, resurrection wasn’t a thing. People didn’t come back to life after they died. Ever. So, the disciples never seemed to hear Jesus when he told them about that. All they heard was that Jesus was going to suffer, going to die. And they didn’t like that. Peter especially didn’t like that. So, because he was Peter, the rock, because he was the one who had gotten it right, he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, Peter began to correct Jesus, because, in Peter’s mind, Jesus was getting the story wrong. Suffering and death were not supposed to be what came next.

And then, Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Matthew 16:23)

A week ago, Peter was the rock on whom the church would be built, so great was his confession of faith. Now he’s Satan? The tempter, tempting Jesus to walk a

road that had not been given to him by his father. Tempting Jesus to turn away from his father's will.

If I were preaching Peter's funeral sermon, which story should I tell? Blessed are you or get behind me Satan? The moment when he got it so very right or the moment when he got it so very wrong.

Because Peter's life was like that. Highs and lows, moments of great faith and great commitment and moments of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, moments of faithlessness and confusion.

Moments when he was everything that Paul described in the life of a Christian, at least from what we know about Peter's life, and moments when it seemed like he got everything wrong.

And the one constant through it all is Jesus. Jesus celebrating Peter when he got it right, and rebuking him when he didn't. But also, never abandoning him. Jesus constantly came back for Peter. The story in today's gospel reading isn't even Peter's worst moment. An argument could be made that his worst moment was when he denied Jesus on the night of Jesus' arrest, saying three times that he had never even met him. And yet, the resurrected Jesus came for Peter again, faithful to his promise to make Peter his rock, and gave him a mission, to feed Jesus' sheep.

And what does that mean for us? We, who might not feel like there would be just one story to tell when we die, at our funerals. We who might think that there would be some nuance required to capture the truth of our lives, of the people we are, people who are sometimes right on track with what we want to do and who we want to be and how we want to follow Jesus and sometimes, well, less so, sometimes barely hanging onto faith or practice, sometimes missing the mark altogether.

Peter's life, his track record, which was not only good, Peter, this sometimes confused and flawed saint, should give us hope. Because even when Peter was

wrong, even when Peter was unfaithful to Jesus, correcting him, doubting him, denying him, Jesus was faithful to him.

And that's where our hope needs to lie. Not in our own goodness, but in Jesus' goodness. Not in our own faithfulness, but in Jesus' faithfulness. Not in our own love, but in Jesus' love. Our goals for how we follow Jesus should be high and lofty, but when we don't meet them, we shouldn't despair. Because Jesus came to find lost sheep. Jesus came not to correct us, but to save us. Jesus came for all of us, no matter what we think we deserve, not just to show us the way home, not just to point us the way and then see if we make it, but to take us in his arms, and carry us. Thanks be to God. Amen.