

Saints Peter and Paul

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado
June 29, 2008**

In the calendar of the Church Year, we walk through six seasons annually beginning with Advent, then the 12 Days of Christmas, followed by Epiphany, Lent, the seven weeks of Easter, and then Pentecost and the Sundays after Pentecost. Perhaps you noticed last Sunday that the bulletin cover indicated that the day was the 6th Sunday after Pentecost. We will continue counting the Sundays after Pentecost until Nov. 23 when we observe the Last Sunday after Pentecost called Christ the King Sunday.

Now and then, a fix commemoration or Minor Festival falls on a Sunday which is true today. The 29th of June is the Commemoration of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles. Our attention is turned this Sunday to these two giants of the Ancient Church, Peter and Paul. The Gospel reading today is Mark's version of Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You (speaking of Jesus) are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29). The Second Lesson contains a simple but powerful confessional statement by Paul, "'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3:21b-23).

Not only are these passages read because of these great statements of faith, but they are also read because they symbolize the impact made by the ministries of these two leaders in the Church immediately following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus. This morning, we'll consider just a bit the contributions of these prominent apostles.

As is evident in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Peter was not only a leader, he was the first mentioned of the inner circle which consisted of Peter, James, and John, but Peter also seemed to be the one to speak for all the disciples on several occasions. Jesus did not have to call on Peter to voice his opinion; Peter was ready to share it impulsively. The experience of the Transfiguration, witnessed by the inner circle of disciples, was one of the high points of following Jesus. Another is the reading for today – Peter's declaration of Jesus' identity. You'd think with these memories, Peter would never waver from his conviction and insight, but then we come to the crucifixion of Jesus, and Peter shows another dimension of his heart. Peter denies Jesus three times. However, instead of despair and separation from the other disciples, Peter gathered with them after the crucifixion and when told that Jesus was alive, was the first of the disciples to enter the empty tomb.

This was followed, according to the Gospel of John, by an encounter of the risen Christ with Peter in which Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter responded

each time with, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” So the three denials were countered by the three affirmations of love and faith. Just like in the baptismal liturgy when the parents and sponsors are asked the threefold denunciation:

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

Those denunciations are followed immediately by the affirmation of faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, using three questions to illicit the confession of faith. Those questions are:

Do you believe in God the Father?
Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

Peter’s three denials are replaced by three declaration of allegiance to Christ Jesus. In baptism, three denunciations are followed by three annunciations of faith. That is all to say Peter has a lasting impact on how we live and practice the faith today.

The Book of Acts tells us how Peter exercised his leadership role in the Church, for example delivering the first Christian Sermon on Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. He performed miracles, administered the affairs of the Church, and was a participant at the first Council of the Ancient Church.

Christian legend has it that Peter carried his ministry to Rome where, under the persecutions of Nero, Peter was martyred by crucifixion. His request when facing death was to be crucified upside down for he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord. So in Christian symbolism, the upside down cross has always stood for the martyrdom of Peter. He truly did – as we read in today’s Gospel Lesson – deny himself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus.

Now let’s turn our attention to Paul. How is it that we call him an apostle when he was not one of the twelve disciples? We have no definitive answer to that question, but some suggest that when the 12 were reduced to 11, the Ancient Church moved to quickly to replace Judas with Matthias, for if they had waited they would have understood that the Lord God was going to call Paul to replace Judas.

Paul is so familiar because he has contributed so much literature in the New Testament. We are prone to think that Paul was always around, but he comes on the scene only after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Recall, his name was Saul, from Tarsus, a city at the northeast end of the Mediterranean Sea, raised in the home of a Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin, and had Roman citizenship. Remember, not everyone who lived in the Roman Empire had Roman citizenship which became important later in his life.

Paul was very dedicated to his religious training and tradition, and protective of his heritage to the point of persecuting Christians, and according to Acts was present at the

stoning of Stephen. The Book of Acts then goes on to describe Saul's Damascus Road experience which resulted in his conversion and his Christian name, Paul. He traveled extensively, recorded in the second half of the Book of Acts. He carried the Gospel of Christ Jesus to Asia Minor and also into Europe, first into Greece, the city of Philippi, other cities of Greece, and finally as a prisoner, ministered in Rome.

Paul wrote many of the books of the New Testament, letters actually, that are the first written expressions of Christian theology. In his writings, he teaches us to always keep our focus on Christ Jesus. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ... I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23-24; 2:2). In the book of Romans, Paul pens some lofty words, none more uplifting than:

For I am convinced...that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

Paul loves the word "grace" – the grace of God in Christ Jesus. He also loved the words "peace" and "reconciliation." These are cornerstone expressions of the Christian faith, words which you probably hear every Sunday. Paul has contributed to the vocabulary we use in worship and in our conversations regarding faith.

Paul was taken to Rome because when arrested in Palestine, he exercised his right to appeal to Caesar. So it was as a prisoner he went to Rome where he lived under what appears to be house arrest for a couple of years. After that, we have no record of what he did or what happened to him. It is assumed that Paul also was martyred during the reign of Nero and that Paul was buried in Rome.

Peter made a profound confession of faith, denied knowing Jesus, but was restored by the risen Christ and made a leader in the Church. From him we learn that sin which separates is overcome by Christ's love and forgiveness so that we can be servants of salvation. Paul's heart was dramatically changed becoming the missionary to the Gentiles, preaching the grace and peace of Christ Jesus to peoples and lands far removed from what we call the Holy Land. We are inheritors of his ministry, for we, too, are Gentiles who have been incorporated into Christ's Church.

Thanks be to you, O Lord, for these brave, committed, and faithful apostles who preserved your Word of forgiveness, restoration, and hope. Keep us, we pray, in the faith, that we, too, may be missionaries of your love and bearers of your compassion. Use us, dear Lord Jesus, as vehicles and conduits of your truth and life. Amen.