

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of light and love, you created us to be your children, to walk with you, to seek you, to know you in the many ways you present yourself. You created us to be your hands and feet in this wonderful world, to nurture, to care, to be loving stewards of your creation. You call us to live as we are, and you know what a difficult calling this is. For these things, we give you great praise and glorify you. But the world sees otherwise. The world wants us pigeonhole us. We want to fit in, and so we neglect how you want us to live to make short-term gains. For these sins against us and you, we beg your forgiveness, Great Creator. We seek full harmony with you and your purposes; we wish to serve you.

Holy God, when we open the scriptures, we often expect to see great examples of faith and works. But we are often disappointed. Instead, we see a mirror, a mirror that shows that most characters in the bible that we laud are often just like us or worse. You called murderers, you called adulterers, you called those that ran from you. These flawed personalities became your people. Help us, God, to see these heroes of the faith exactly as they are, in all of their doubt and failure, to see that we are just as called and equipped as they were when they fully became yours. Help us especially see today the example of Simon Peter, the Greatest Apostle, who denied Christ three times but became a hero of faith to us today. He is an example that we can look to remember that you do not call the equipped but equip the called. We pray these things in the name of the Lord of perfect and imperfect, the faithful and the faithless, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together...

SERMON

Greetings. I'm glad to be with you this Sunday morning, to arise to a new week just as the Lord arose on the first day of the week. You all know me, especially with all those

cultural stereotypes. I've got my grand flowing robes, and I'm always imagined as the one standing at the pearly gates, saying who can come in and who must stay out of Heaven. Well, that's embellished...I'm not that harsh! With my profile, you'd probably expect someone better educated, more handsome, a great leader...all those things. Sorry to disappoint you. I'm just a plain man, an able fisherman, with really no marketable skills outside of throwing nets and knowing when to drag them in. I'm not smart. I'm not educated. I'm not anyone special. And yet, I am special. This amazing guy I met one day told me I was. And there was so much...tangible power, love, and goodness about him that I believed it. I became proud of it. And I think you believe it too, based on all that I've heard along the way. But I haven't even introduced myself properly. My name is Simon. Well, actually, it's now Simon Peter, and I'm a rock, a fool, and a saint, all at the same time. Let me tell you a couple of my stories...the real stories behind the stereotypes. I'm sure that you'll find something to help your journey in my stories.

After that man came to me one day, I dropped everything and followed him. His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and I, along with eleven others (one of them my brother, Andrew) joined this group that followed him everywhere. I had a pretty good profile. They knew me as the first in line after Jesus, the greatest of those disciples. Oh, I was surely pleased to have picked up that mantle. I wanted to be big, bold, and important indeed. He even took me aside and told me I was to be called "Peter," the Rock. I am Simon the Rock, and this Jesus of Nazareth I met told me that a church would be built upon me. Well, what greater compliment could you give a guy! Thousands of generations would look back to me and see the person they would need to be. You're here because Jesus built the church on me! Of course, we can't fully live up to Jesus' example, but we can do some great things

when you live in my example since I am “the Rock.” Had I mentioned that I might have a little bit too much pride sometimes?

Yeah, I am pretty prideful. Time to get honest with one another. I’m not all perfect. No, seriously, I’m not! I know you don’t believe me, but some of my story is told in scripture. I had many little... well, follies around Jesus, but I’ll tell you about my two greatest blunders. There’s that time when we were all in a boat, crossing without Jesus, when this wind came about, tossing us back and forth. It was enough for anyone to lose their loaves and fishes in a dramatic way. But, suddenly, that was the least of our concerns. We were absolutely astonished to see Jesus walking on water. None of us could believe our eyes. Well, I couldn’t idly stand by. I had to join in, since I was pretty much the leader around those parts. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” I said. He told me to come, so I jumped out eagerly. Do you know how you think something is a great idea, then when you get into it, you suddenly realize...well...I should have had a little more thought and a lot less energy? This was one of those situations. I jump out, and think, “Hey! This is alright!” Then the wind blew. Oh, the wind blew, and I lost all that confidence. I’m standing on water...then the water gave way and became, well, like water! I was sinking. “Lord, save me!” I cried. He didn’t leave me alone, picked me up, and told me I was of “little faith.” Can’t argue with that one, but at least he affirmed that I was not without faith!

Then, of course, I made the biggest mistake of my life. No excuse for that one; it truly was my bad. This proved that I, by definition, am a hypocrite. It was that fateful Thursday when everything changed. Jesus said very clearly to all of us that we would be scattered the night he was betrayed. He told us that none of us would be by him when the

end came. Of course, I was greatly insulted. My goodness, I am the Rock; I am Peter! He told me that I would be the rock, so I had to stand up and declare otherwise. I knew I was faithful; I knew I'd stick by him to the end. He did not believe me. "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times," he said. Well, that faithless teacher obviously did not know what to expect from the one he called "the Rock." I had to make my point. "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you," I said. "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And I was the leader; they all stood right behind me in my grandiose proclamation. I was big and important; I was the lead disciple, so while everyone stood behind me, I was the one who would carry this through! Well, then everything went down. Jesus was taken away, arrested like a violent criminal, and I sought to stay by him...ya know, from a distance. But it went down, just like he said, but not like I could ever imagine. When that fateful moment happened, I was not in some high court. I was not in front of the executioners. I was not given the choice of denying the man or dying. It was no blaze of glory. It was a simple gathering of commoner, who had heard about the commotion of that evening. They seemed to know that I had something to do with it and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." "I do not know what you are talking about!" I responded. The next person: "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." "I do not know the man!" And, the finale: "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." "I do not know the man!" And then, suddenly, out of the corner of my ear, I heard the crowing of the cock. I remembered his words. I remembered my words. The whole evening came rushing back to me. Three times. I had denied Jesus three times! I, the Rock, the one the church would be built upon, was the biggest hypocrite out there! I had so many words and so little responsibility in my heart. I knew then that I

had really failed. I had done the worst thing possible and denied my Lord in front of others. Can you imagine the shame? He was right there...just a few feet away...and I had told all around me that I had nothing to do with him. Do you know how bitter that makes me feel? I wept bitterly, but that doesn't describe it well. Despite my ramblings, there are really no words that can get to the heart of that disaster.

That was it. I was one of the lowest persons that day, and none of his disciples were particularly great after that event. The worst thing I could have done after all these things would be to consider myself a total failure and just give up. If there's something you need to remember about this Jesus and the God that we all serve, it is that there is no final ending. God does not give up on you, and there is nothing, NOTHING, that you can do that will end God's love for you and God's direction for you in the future. Look at me. I did things that I regret greatly. I gave up on Jesus. But that is not the ending. When it comes to Jesus the Christ, we are never talking about endings; we are talking about new life.

And New Life did come. Jesus rose again on a Sunday just like this one, and I testify to that resurrection. He taught us again before the other disciples and myself saw him rise to heaven. I was there on the day of Pentecost, and I preached like no one has preached before or since that the Holy Spirit has come! I preached to so many after that day, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that is what I am remembered for.

So, yes, I get it. I am a prideful figure. I lived a life that saw me as one of the greatest disciples of all time, yes, even the Rock of the Church that still stands strong to this day. I also lived a life that saw me be sinful but also saintly. You as the church will either lift me up as a grand disciple or quite the fool, depending on which of the stories you read. Fair enough. However, before you do, I would suggest that we all look in a mirror. Look deeply.

I believe you will see me looking back at you. Oh, I know, indeed, I know that each of you lifts yourself up as quite the Christian sometimes. You also can be the harshest critic when you fail to live up to your lofty standards. Look at me. I was a companion of Jesus of Nazareth, swore that I would never leave his side, and a couple of hours later denied that I ever knew him. I am quite the hypocrite. If I can deny Jesus the Christ three times at his most dire of hours and receive grace abundant to become known as one of the greatest examples of apostles, what does that say about you and your minor sins? I believe, at the end of the day, that I was chosen not for my marketable skills, nothing that you would put on your resume. I have no power by the standards of the world, but by the power of God, I helped change the world as an Apostle. What I discovered is this simple fact: what matters is your heart. Is it open to receive the changing power of the Holy Spirit and the words of this powerful man Jesus of Nazareth? Or is it full of guilt, denying the power of God's grace? Only one of these is full of life and power for the future.

Jesus was not mistaken. I was the Rock of the Church. I was not perfect, just perfectly flawed. You are not perfect. You are perfectly flawed. And yet, you can be the Rock of the Church too. The Church is founded not on those with perfect faith, not on those who do everything right, who cross all their T's and dot all their I's. That's just plain impossible and chasing after the wind. The true Rocks of the Church today are those who mess up but don't let it defeat them. They learn from it and seek to be more devoted, more loving, more like that man Jesus. Make that your mission. I believe Jesus wants a church full of flawed devoted people instead of a church full of perfection-driven people afraid to fail. Choose my path, the path seemingly of failure, but one of an honest seeker. Amen.