

Peter: Biting Off More than You Can Chew

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Mark 14:27-31; 66-72

A Fred Craddock story: “I was in graduate school at Vanderbilt. I had left my wife and children in the little church I served near Nashville and had moved into a dormitory room to prepare for those terrible comprehensive exams I had to take for my PhD in New Testament. It’s a make-or-break time; they can kill you. I would go out every night about midnight to a little all-night diner – no tables, just little stools – and have a grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee to take a break from my studies. It was the same every night. The fellow behind the counter at the grill knew when I walked in to prepare a grilled cheese and pour a cup of coffee. He’d give me a refill; sometimes come back with more refills. I joined the men of the night sitting there hovering over their coffee as I thought about those New Testament oral exams and the questions I might be asked.

One night I had been there a while when I noticed a man who was there when I went in but had not yet been waited on. I had had a refill as had everyone else, but he had not been waited on. He was an old, gray-haired black man. Finally the man behind the counter went to him and gruffly asked, ‘What do you want?’

“Whatever the man said, the fellow went to the grill, scooped up a little dark patty off the back of the grill, and put it on a piece of bread, without condiment, without napkin. The cook handed it to the man who gave him some money, and then went out the side door by the garbage can and out onto the street. He sat on the curb and ate that dry sandwich with the salt and pepper of the dirt kicked up by passing eighteen-wheelers as the only seasoning.

Concludes Craddock, “I didn’t say anything. I did not reprimand, protest or witness to the cook. I did not go out and sit beside the man on the curb. I didn’t do or say anything. I was only thinking about the questions coming up on the New Testament exam. Finally I left that little place and started up the hill back to my room to resume my studies. And off in the distance...I heard a cock crow.”

Fred Craddock – a teacher and preacher admired, even revered, by hundreds of students and preachers...including me. Yet still he is haunted by that one night when, in his heart, he believes he was unfaithful to the Gospel. In a crucial moment of decision, in a time of testing, he turned away...he denied his Lord and was left wondering if, when it came to his faith, his chosen path, he was not up to it, had perhaps bitten off more than he could chew. It pains me to think of the many times over the years I have not been up to it, when I have let myself and my Lord down. It happens...

As I think of Craddock’s story, a wonderful man of faith who still experienced such great disappointment in himself, my mind turns to Peter and the familiar text we heard today. There are few Biblical stories charged with such dramatic power as this one, what is commonly called Peter’s betrayal. After his last supper with his disciples, Jesus takes them to the Mount of Olives. Knowing what is to come, the trials he and his closest followers will face, he asks if they are up to it, will they stand by him? Without hesitation, the always impetuous Peter declares that even if everyone else deserts Jesus, he will not. He will stay with Jesus to the end...no matter what.

I suppose, at one time or another, in some way, Jesus asks that of us all: Are you sure you want to be my follower? Will you still trust me and God, still walk with me, even when times get tough? Will you take a stand with me, even if it is unpopular or risky or uncomfortable? Will you stick to it when, with the passing years, you have grown tired and weary, perhaps a bit discouraged, in those times when compassion fatigue sets in? Jesus asked it of Peter. He asked it of Fred Craddock. He asks it of us. How do we answer?

Peter clearly did bite off more than he could chew that night. And Jesus seemed to know this. He warned him of the danger, saying, “Peter, your words are wonderful, but I fear you are in way over your head, that your actions will not match your fine words. In spite of your passionate statement, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And that is exactly what he did. As some have sadly concluded, when it came to his faith, his discipleship, Peter was a man of great pretensions and poor performance who did not so much betray Jesus as fail him. But in all honesty, I’m not at all sure that I would have done any better, either in that diner with Fred Craddock, or on the Mount of Olives with Peter and Jesus.

And yet, as I reflect on this classic biblical text, this encounter between Jesus and Peter, I wonder if there aren't two dangers at work here? One, biting off more than you can chew. The other, not biting off more than you can chew!

The story is told of an old jazz club in New Orleans. In a corner of that club sat an old dilapidated piano. All of the musicians who played the club complained about it, hated to play it. Singers hated singing with it. Some groups began bringing in their own keyboards. Finally, after years of listening to these jazz musicians complain about his piano, the owner of the club decided to do something about it. He had the piano painted.

How tempting it is, when Jesus asks us to stand with him, to take the approach of that club owner...just add a little paint and not really change anything; to play it safe, keep Jesus at arm's length, say the right words but not do anything really risky or new in his name. Why risk failure? Why risk disillusionment? Who wants to end up like Peter?

And yet, how sad not to take the risk of biting off more than we can chew. I think of the oft-quoted words of Robert Browning:

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?*

Again, in a world that often frustrates dreams, it is easy to become prudential, careful, cautious, to just sit down and wait, as we are told Peter did. And yet..."Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp..." No, we might not accomplish all our dreams, some of our hopes may go unfulfilled, but does that mean we should settle for none of them? My mind goes back to Fred Craddock. The Christian church would have lost so much, I would have lost so many good sermon illustrations, if he just thrown in the towel and given up after that one night of failure. And Peter...yes, he also knew great disappointment and failure, partly, I believe, because he aimed so high, dared to dream such large dreams. Should we really ever discourage anyone – or ourselves – from that? And let's not forget that that night in the courtyard was not the end of his story.

From the depths of that horrible night, you might say he rose again. He was the one who rallied the others because, in fact, they had all fled, had all failed Jesus. It was Peter who began and became the leader of that first church in Jerusalem, Peter who eventually left Jerusalem and became the first Christian missionary, Peter who became a model of faithfulness and is remembered as the rock of the church, and who, tradition has it, eventually met his own martyrdom in Rome. Yes, again, he knew all too well defeat and disappointment but his great expectations, large dreams, expansive hopes never died. It really is not a bad thing to bite off more than you can chew.

In this, our 125th year, I think of our own church. In the mid-fifties, the congregation left a crumbling building behind downtown and bought this property. It was a courageous move; it was a risky move. You will never afford it, they were told, and besides, no one will ever go to a church way out there. Inactive members came out of woodwork to vote against it, but the motion passed. It was that saint of the church, Dorothy McHugh, who, thinking back on those difficult days, told me, "There was nothing wrong with our church that a few funerals couldn't fix!" And yes, there were not enough of them and yes, they did not have enough money. But they had dreams, they had faith, and they refused to be deterred. We stand on the shoulders of saints who were not afraid to bite off more than anyone thought they could chew...and thank God they did.

And the tradition continues: after years of dreaming, we built Memorial Hall; we hired a second minister; now we have completed Pilgrim Center with our beautiful chapel. Yes, here we are, still kicking and still crazy after all these years!

During the most violent moments of the French Revolution, when the angry crowds were sweeping by his office, it is reported that Robespierre cried out, "Find out which way the people are going; I am their leader!" But such an attitude is not being a Christian disciple at all. We are not called upon to "get along by going along." From the beginning, Jesus asked his followers to set the standards, to be the dreamers, to have a certain recklessness about seeking a better world, and not to be afraid of running a risk or two. And most of all he urged his disciples not to give up or give in, not even in the face of life's inevitable disappointments and failures, but rather to keep on caring and keep on trying.

And that is why I insist there are two dangers in life: the one is to bite off more than you can chew; the other is not to bite off more than you can chew. No one knew these dangers better than Peter – he knew them and lived them. And in the living he learned: you don't have to let one failure defeat you. Just because one person can't achieve everything, does not mean he or she can't achieve something. And he learned, by God's grace, never to stop dreaming.