

St Pius-St Anthony 22nd Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

I expect the question: Is this the same Peter we heard about last week? *'The higher they rise, the harder they fall'*. Peter crashes this week in Jesus' leadership course. But I find that is the best lens to view this humbling of Peter. Jesus is training Peter in good leadership: being a humble (aware of his weaknesses), responsive (good ear listening) and hard working (willing to forgive) Peter thought he could sell Jesus a 'salvation without the cross'. Unfortunately, this is not new for Peter. Before today's fall, in the background is the fresh memory of Peter's recent sinking and raising episode (recall him boldly demanding to walk on water, and then his slip below a wave only to be caught raised by Jesus) Here he is again, Jesus commending him last week for recognizing His divinity and mission. This week Jesus condemns him for selfish thinking and opposing that divine mission. Some call this the 'rock to block' experience of Peter. Somehow, Peter thinks there is a 'self-promotional' way to the kingdom, a way to get the trophy without the trial, get first place without work & practice. Maybe the third time is the charm for him, but, no it won't be, because Peter is going to memorialize his pattern of fall/rise by his hurtful denials of even knowing Jesus that night that Jesus is arrested. (The good news again, is that Jesus works with Peter, the good redeemer He is, offering Peter the mercy of starting over with the resurrection appearance on the seashore (John 21- I love how that forgiveness plays out a return to the original scene-seashore-where Jesus first called Peter from the boats and nets to follow him--He'll ask Peter "do you love me", three times to undo those hurtful denials). But Peter is still being schooled by Jesus. He will learn. The true rock and foundation of the church is the strength of loving forgiveness-the cross of Jesus. Peter is still learning to follow Jesus-that Jesus is master and Peter is disciple. Humble leaders are recognized in their ability to learn quick, to admit their limits, most often not be seen or heard and be quick to work at needs doing (squeaky wheels do get greased, but the real mover that keeps things going is the leader who supplies and applies the grease!) I remember a rising star in KY government, once saying, 'you learn quick in politics to work with others and stay humble, because you bump into & pass the same people coming down as you did going up'. So Peter's fall today reflects that he is still full of his own ideas and self, instead of being full of Jesus; Peter thinks that his position is his own, his own doing, and Jesus reminds him today that the one who can put him in the center and (rock) foundation of the church can also put him in the back of the line (get behind me-back in line Satan). So we see Peter, in his sinfulness of interfering with Jesus' divine mission, take his place again 'following Jesus', his humble submission 'getting back behind Jesus'. It is safe to say, "Peter knows sin; He knows his fall". But those who best understand, are those who have been through it themselves, by experience. And can lead others through it too. So Peter can lead best, and witness to what God's forgiveness means-

generously sharing-preaching that forgiving mercy of God to others! It may have slipped by us last week, but this unique leadership position of Peter's came through in Jesus' talk about empowering Peter with the authority to 'bind and loose'. We understand that to be the authority of forgiving sins. I want to give us a heads up that for the next couple weeks we are going to be hearing a lot about forgiveness, and that it is the defining quality of true disciples of Jesus (receiving it and giving it). Peter is still learning this point himself in the unfolding of the gospel, and that may explain why Jesus repeats His talk about binding and loosing (forgiving) again in the 18th chapter of Matthew. (Last week, He gave authority to Peter (of binding & loosing) in the 16th chapter, and next week we will hear that Jesus gives the whole church such a binding /loosing authority in regard to others' sins (repeats in Chap 18). Peter as leader, should set the example, but if not, then Jesus says, "Church, pick it up!"). So again, I suggest that we prepare ourselves for taking on the ministry of 'forgiveness' anew or rediscovering its value in us being true witnesses/disciples of Jesus. We are not through (never will be through) hearing about forgiveness from Jesus. Next week, He is going to introduce a conflict resolution-mediation method to the whole church and then the next week He'll go on to speak about the 7 x 70 numerical limit-that is no limit-on extending forgiveness to others. So, Jesus, who is still teaching Peter Christian leadership in our gospels will be teaching us too about the role of humility and strong forgiveness active in the lives of those claiming to follow Him.

Sometimes, people suggest that 'forgiveness' is weakness. I have to wonder if they have really ever 'forgiven' others. Forgiveness is tough work (getting over one's pride that clings to injury through selfish ego projection). It takes practice and time and good examples. Jesus certainly sets us one Himself. Matthew gets at this difficulty of forgiveness in the opening line of today's reading: (Mat16:21) "From that time on, Jesus **began to show** his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer greatlyand be killed..." To come around to God's way of thinking (about forgiveness) it is 'gonna take time'. Matthew said, "began to show"- 'began'-- the strength of forgiveness is not acquired in one sitting. And 'began to show' that we learn best by example. Jesus is going to show us ("Watch me he says". the cross). Further suggesting that this discipleship training about the 'Son of Man' (& by extension, we followers) being rejected, suffering and even dying for salvation is actually stated three times over by Mark in chapters 8, 9 & 10. But, Matthew has Jesus say it four times (Chapters 16, 17, 20 & 26). So we Christians, we have work ahead of us. To be a disciple means we accept the discipline. Jesus summarizes this Christian work today, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt 16:24). Maybe we can call it a spiritual 'no pain, no gain' policy. To follow Jesus, we will feel it. And we feel it most in the act of 'forgiving' others. Like any athlete, we make the team by trying out, and we stay on the team by continually practicing, conditioning, working out and progressing –setting bars and weights ever higher

and higher. And keeping our eye on the coach, Jesus. Again, I point out that Jesus mentions his coming 'passion-suffering' four times in Matthew, because as a good leader He is preparing us. What lies ahead is the work of forgiveness. Work! We Today's reading shows Peter still in the middle of it, working on it. But He does take his place again behind Jesus. But how about us? How do we practice 'forgiveness'? I am sure the world and others give us plenty of opportunity to exercise 'patient forgiveness'. How are we doing as 'Christian leaders' and disciples of Jesus? Do we reflect His work and example? The next couple of Sundays' gospels is going to supply us further teaching on Christian forgiveness. This invites us to look at the work of forgiveness in our lives/homes/work and communities. A take home test, practice question for all disciples of Jesus is to ask and answer, "What needs forgiving in us (that cultivates humility), and then what/who do we need to forgive in others (that will cultivate strength in our Christian witness)?"