



Homilies for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

- [You Shall Be Catching People - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
- [Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C - Don L. Fischer](#)

You Shall Be Catching People

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

A fascinating Gospel. Not because it's another can-you-top-this fish story. Rather because Peter's life experience is so important for Christian living, for you and me. And so, against all my instincts, only two points: (1) Peter and (2) you and I.

I

First, let's talk about Peter. Who is this Jewish man who in the Gospels heads the list of Jesus' special friends? The New Testament tells us much, and still too little. You know Peter was married, don't you? How do we know? He had a mother-in-law; Jesus got her fever below 98.6. Peter's trade? A fisherman, a partner with John and James. In fact, he had just spent a whole night fishing, had just let down his nets again for an unexpected catch, when Jesus said to him, "from now on you shall be catching people" (Lk 5:10). Peter's apprenticeship as an apostle, his boot camp for catching people, is a maddening mix of incidents delightful and incidents frustrating, a genuine example of human growing under a tough but compassionate teacher. A few episodes from "Peter, This Is Your Life." Peter is impetuous; his heart speaks ahead of his head. At times it works out well, at times it's disastrous. Remember the apostles' boat on the wind-swept waters? Jesus comes "walking toward them on the sea." Peter cries, "Lord, if it is you [out there], bid me come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come." Peter starts out, the wind terrifies him, he starts to doubt, begins to sink. Jesus takes him by the hand: ", man of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 14:22-31). Again, who Jesus asks his disciples, "Who am I?," Peter blurts out before anyone else, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16 And Jesus reacts: "Blessed are you.... You are Peter, and on this rock will build my church.... I will give you the keys of the kingdom ( heaven" (Mt 16:15-19). But when Jesus predicts his passion, h dreadful dying, Peter takes him aside, rebukes him, "God forbid I Lord! This must never happen to you." And Jesus responds in unusually harsh language, "Get behind me, Satan!" (vv. 22-23).

Peter is touchingly humble. Take today's Gospel. Tired after a empty night, annoyed perhaps at this landlubber's "Put out into the deep water," he still lowers the nets at Jesus' word. When the fish fill two boats, he sinks down at Jesus' feet and begs, "Go away from ml Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8).

Peter has trouble being faithful. When Jesus tells him, "I ha' prayed for you that your faith (your fidelity, your loyalty) may n( fail," Peter cries impulsively, "Lord, I am ready to go with you t prison and to death" (Lk 22:32-33). And yet Jesus has to reproach him for falling asleep while his master endures a bloody sweat I Gethsemane: "Could you not keep awake one hour?" (Mk 14:37 More sadly still, when Jesus has been captured and a servant girl stares at Peter and says, "This man also was with [Jesus]," his response stuns us: "Woman, I do not know him" (Lk 22:56-57 Three times he denies his master. The Lord looks at Peter, and Peter weeps "bitterly" (vv. 61-62).

Peter loves his Lord. Recall the beach scene after Jesus' resurrection. Seven disciples are fishing, with nary a bite; Jesus appears on the beach, tells them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some" (Jn 21:6). After they've hauled in 153, John says to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Immediately Peter jumps off the boat, swim ashore to greet Jesus and have breakfast with him. But after breakfast Jesus still has something more for Peter. Three times Peter has denied him; three times Jesus asks him, "Do you love me?" After the third time, Peter is hurt: "Lord, you know everything; you know me that I love you" (Jn 21:15-17). And Jesus commits his flock to him.

Peter follows his master to the end. Once Jesus has given Peter full pastoral care of his flock, he utters sobering words for Peter "Truly, I tell you, when you were a young man, you used to fasten your own belt and set off for wherever you wished. But when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and another will fasten your belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go" (Jn 21:18). And John the evangelist adds, "What [Jesus] said indicated the sort of death by which [Peter] was to glorify God" (v. 19). In perhaps 64 or 65 Peter died a martyr in Rome, a victim of Nero's persecution. Possibly he was crucified.

## II

Now how does the experience of Peter touch you and me? One obvious way: the word "apostle." It means, literally, someone who is sent, someone on mission. And that summons up a profound program propounded 30 years ago by Belgian Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, a program for coresponsibility in the Church, a program, founded on profound theological insight, to regroup the Church into an organic body with a shared responsibility. Integral to coresponsibility was Suenens' startling statement: The greatest day in the life of a pope is not his coronation but his baptism, the day of his mission, his sending, "to live the Christian life in obedience to the gospel."<sup>4</sup>

By baptism each of us is an apostle, is sent on mission. Each of us is sent to penetrate our culture with the spirit of the gospel, to transform our earth into a realm of justice, peace, and love. Pope and peasant, female and male, young and middle-aged and "third age." Not alone, not each a Lone Ranger. Over these past weeks St. Paul has proclaimed to us a church that is a single body, the body of Christ, a body where each of us is important, where no one can say to any other "I have no need of you," where "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:21-22). A body that is effective to the extent that all of us share responsibility, all of us are coworkers in the one mission. What Vatican II phrased in technical language, imaginative Jesuit William O'Malley put in a typically perky paragraph:

... we can no longer depend on the comforting simplism of "The Church Teaching" and "The Church Taught"; there are too many Ph.D.'s out in the pews now. The magisterium and the People of God are now like Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle at the end of "Pygmalion." He had found a tatterdemalion flower girl and turned her into a lady. But once the metamorphosis took place, neither Higgins nor Eliza knew quite what to do about the new relationship. He was no longer the all-knowing teacher, and she no longer the biddable pupil. Not only does the official church have an obligation to listen more to the people, but the people have the intimidating obligation to speak up....

The point is, my friends in the pews, you are not substitutes for a decimated priesthood, to be returned to the sidelines if and when vocations to the first team blossom again. This is your God-given turf. Take hold of it-with all due modesty if you can, aggressively if you must.

Precisely here dear apostle Peter can help. Your life as an apostle may well mirror his, and so it may be well to keep Peter in mind. He is so much the way you are or are likely to be. Not because he had a mother-in-law. Rather because, to be an effective apostle, you too

will have to experience your Christ. Not quite as he did, face to face; but as he did, heart to heart. Will have to speak to Christ, more especially listen to him.

Like Peter, you too may mingle the rational and the rash, find your heart speaking before your head. At times it will work out well, at times it may prove counterproductive. In times of peace and consolation, you too will profess passionately a unique Son of God who borrowed your flesh and died for you; when the storm clouds gather, you just might cry out against a suffering Lord who permits so much pain in his own human images from womb to tomb: "God forbid it! This must never happen to us."

Like Peter, you will sink to your knees in sorrow over your failure to trust your Christ, may well exclaim, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am so sinful." Like Peter, you may glory in your fidelity, your loyalty, assure him confidently, "I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," and suddenly sense how faithless each of us humans ' can be. But if so, then, please God, you too will weep bitterly and know that Jesus still loves you.

Like Peter, you can protest, hurt because you can say sincerely to your Christ, "You know I love you," yet recognize how far removed our love is from his love who said, "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12).

Like Peter, you may have to follow your Christ to a bitter end, may hear words similar to those he heard: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will lead you a way you don't want to go." And still you will go, because you love your Christ, and because it is the cross that saves-his cross and yours. And so you will say with St. Paul to the body of Christ, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church" (Col 1:24). What is wondrous about all this is that none of it need be loss; all of it, the highs and the lows, can make for an effective apostle, help to transform the earth on which you dance. Why? Because all of it is human and Christian growing, where grace is more powerful than sin, where you can say forcefully with Paul, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.... For whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10). "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Peter discovered that. I must ask myself: Have I?

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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

**SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 6:1-2a,3-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11**

This Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time has a very clear theme: Individuals throughout history have been called by God to take on special roles, special tasks for God, to be instruments of bringing life and goodness to people. It seems almost universally that those people God chose were a little reluctant. There was always the sense that they weren't brave enough, strong enough, worthy enough. It's like God is always choosing people who feel that they aren't the ones who should have been selected. But then a change occurs. There is an experience they have that enables them to take this risky invitation from God and to do his work. One of the ways we describe this movement in a person's life that changes them is "the work of the Spirit." The Spirit is that which (and only that which) can truly transform. Can truly change us. We just listened to an antiphon written by an

extraordinary figure, the mystic Hildegard of Bingen. I would like to read the text to you, because it is so appropriate for what I want to say today. This antiphon is a hymn to the Holy Spirit. It says:

The Holy Spirit that gives life  
And moves all things  
And is the root of every creature  
And cleanses all things of impurity  
Wipes away sins  
Anoints our wounds  
This is the radiant and admirable life  
Awakening and reawakening all things.

I love that image of the Holy Spirit, this energy and power that flows from God, which touches the human soul. This energy awakens something in the human soul that has been there all the while - but needs to be challenged and awakened. One of the clear images in the Scriptures of the work of Jesus is to wake people up, to make them alert and attentive, and to move them to a place of greater consciousness. The part I find so fascinating is that there is a way in which those who are often challenged to be religious leaders, those traditions we have throughout history of trying to move people into a greater awareness of what God is trying to teach us, often fall prey to a kind of unconsciousness. That often happens because the leaders - those in charge- find themselves trusting in something other than the Spirit. They end up putting people asleep. There are many ways that religious leaders have had this unfortunate reputation of being unconscious, of being ineffective, and not moving people. This is not to pick on any particular religious leader. It is to simply say that there is in this human system called religion a very dangerous, seductive weakness. When you get to the inside, when you get to be a part of this institution, you can become separated from those who are most in need of your help. You end up putting your confidence in your performance, in the system that is around you, and you end up feeling very much that you are part of the "inside group." You are an insider. Your confidence and your strength seem to come from what you are able to accomplish, from how people see you. Or how they honor you. There is something in the system itself that is weak that tends to allow leaders to fall into a kind of complacency, a kind of sleepiness.

It seems that when Jesus came into the world that is what he found: Religious leaders who were more blind than they were open. More asleep than they were awake. More dead than they were alive. It seems clear that when we look at the people Jesus called, and those he reached and tried to pull into his world of proclaiming the gospel, we recognize one thing: He picked outsiders. He never seemed to work with the high priests. Or the Pharisees or scribes. He didn't seem to be able to reach them. Jesus is always calling the outsider. Look at this set of readings. We have Isaiah, a reluctant prophet, who is called by God. He basically admits that he hasn't been telling the truth. And most of his friends don't tell the truth. Here comes this energy from God that says, "Isaiah, I would like you to be a person who comes into this world with a new vision of what I am asking you to do. And I want you to speak the truth." Isaiah says, "Woe is me. How can you ask me to be the one that tells the truth, when in fact, I have lying lips. And most of my friends lie, too." What is interesting is that this Seraphim, this angel figure, comes up to him and says, "Don't worry about where you've been. Don't worry about what you've been involved in. I can take care

of that." There is the image of an angel that takes a burning ember and places it against the lips to this to-be prophet, Isaiah, and says, "Now there. That's over. That's the past. Don't worry about that. I want you to be able to feel the strength of my Spirit working in you. You are going to do an extraordinary job at this because you know lying lips. If I am going to ask you to go into this culture and begin to speak to it about its weaknesses, you have to know those weaknesses. You have to be in touch with that."

We have an image of a repentant sinner being called to be an instrument of God. What is interesting about repentant sinners is that they have a sense of being touched by God, of being transformed by God. They don't come to this task feeling confident because they have such a perfect record or feeling that they can rely on their own strength. Or their own self-discipline. Or the view of everyone around them that this is what they should do because they are the most qualified person. No, they come to their task without qualifications, other than the power of the Spirit. When we look at Paul, we hear him say that many men have been called to follow Jesus. Jesus appeared to all of these men and strengthened and encouraged them. All of a sudden, Paul says, this figure Jesus came to me - this strange, unnaturally born apostle. Paul was a man who was constantly persecuting the Church. We have the image of a light coming this time, not fire, and blinding his eyes, knocking him off his horse. Paul sees that he has been doing just the opposite of what God would like him to do. In spite of this, God loves him. God touches Paul, calling him out of that illusion into the truth. God says, "Now you are going to be capable of being a very powerful figure in the work I have called you to do. You can't sit back and say, 'I have been given this job because I am so well-qualified.'" It's simply because Paul has been so uniquely touched, so transformed. Paul goes into the task very conscious that he has not been the one who has earned this position. He is the one who has been gifted with this position. In the gospel, Jesus is calling these men from their ordinary positions into the extraordinary ministry of the gospel. He is working with them. He does the simple act of giving them advice about where to catch fish. And yet, it seems clear to Peter and his friends that this is not just an ordinary wise fisherman giving them advice. There is something about Jesus that is more than they had ever experienced. He had enormous power. They felt this power, this Spirit, emanating from this man. Right away, the disciples felt they were in the presence of something holy, something good. The first thing Peter thinks is: "Get away from me because I am not worthy of being around something like this. I have not been that good of a man."

Isn't it interesting that in all of these figures we find the same, basic dynamic: Someone who recognizes that they are not earning any of these positions God is giving them, but they are willing to serve simply because they recognize their weakness. They know their faults. They understand their humanity. And yet, they also understand that there is a power God is giving them that changes everything. How does it change everything? What is the universal experience that happens to every man and every woman who fully enters into this work of Christianity? What is the experience that all of these figures in the Scripture today have all experienced? It strikes me that one of the things we have done to give ourselves a sense of value and importance is to perform. To do the right things. We often have this self-image based on our performance. We often subtly shift that sense of ourselves to the way people respond to us. We might say, "Well, if they think this way about me, then that's the kind of person I am. I am who people think I am." In fact, this is very risky. We can perform to a very high degree. We can dance as fast as we can. We can win, in a sense (at least if we are not living with these people!) a tremendous amount of appreciation. And even if we do live with them, sometimes we can be working so hard to please people, to do what they want us to do - so that we can get a sense that they see us

as good, valuable and loving - and then we can believe in our goodness. Jesus had this wonderful way of simply bypassing all of that. Jesus went right to the heart of the person. He didn't focus on their shadow. He didn't focus on their mistakes or their faults, which intuitively he knew were there. Those faults didn't seem to bother Jesus.

Never was there a sense that Jesus was blaming anyone or angry at anyone who was willing to face the simple truth of their faults. The only people Jesus was angry with were those who would not accept the fact that they were flawed. Then he was angry. Then he was upset. Isn't it interesting that we often project that kind of anger Jesus had toward those who were simply shut down and closed, who wouldn't face their humanity, to those of us who acknowledge our humanity. We think that same kind of anger is directed toward us, even though we recognize our flawed nature. It's just the opposite. Jesus did not work with people's shadows, their weaknesses. He wanted to free people from over-identifying their person with their performance and said, "Look, I see you as someone extraordinarily good I see you as someone who has potential to work with me. I am calling you to your destiny. I just want you to live the life I am calling you to live." Who cares about what you have done in the past? The issue is: What do you want to do now with that same energy you might have used in the past to go after something that didn't really work. That is a good description of sin, going after something that didn't really work. Jesus wants us to take that same energy, that same healthy self-centeredness, and move it toward something that is much more life-giving called our destiny. Being an instrument of this incredible gift of the Spirit. We can do it, Jesus is saying to us. That's why almost always initially people react to Jesus' call by saying, "You've got the wrong man. You've got the wrong woman. You're looking to someone who is better than I am to do all of this good work." If Jesus was looking for people to be good, and to be the source of their goodness in their lives, that would make sense. Jesus would then find only "good" people. If it isn't from them - and they haven't proved that they possess it - then there won't be any goodness in there.

What Jesus wants is people to recognize their humanity. He wants people to realize that their human spirit is flawed by its very nature. It is basically selfish. It basically makes choices that are not necessarily wise. Jesus says, "That's fine. That's how you were made. That's what it means to be human. But I would like you to believe that if you accept your human frailty, your broken nature, then I would like to step in and say, 'I will invite you to be a powerful instrument if you simply trust that this power is coming through you - not from you.'" Nothing is clearer in the work of Jesus than that he kept saying this. Nothing is clearer in our tradition that you and I are called to be like Christ. We are called to be "other Christs." If we sense that Christ was not human, a perfect person who never made a mistake and never failed, then we can't identify with it. But if we make the more correct assumption that Christ was a human like us in all things - and yet so filled with Spirit, so aware of a power coming from outside of him - we know that this greater energy is what took over. Jesus' lack of sin was not because he was such a disciplined human, but because he was such a docile, open human. He was so filled with goodness it overshadowed Jesus' humanity. We take it even further to say that Jesus was all human and all divine. Just chew on that for a while. That can't be explained, other than to say it is part of a great mystery. We are to participate in that mystery. We are fully human, but we are participating in this incredible gift called divinity. Our challenge is to wake up to that truth so we can experience the fullness of this work we are called to do.

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