

The Odd Couple

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Sermon for June 29, 2003

Lessons for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul in Year B

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Psalm 87:1-3, 5-7

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Mark 8:27-35

I'm here to talk to you today about the odd couple. No, I'm not talking about Felix and Oscar, so wonderfully portrayed on TV in my childhood by Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. I'm talking about Christianity's own odd couple, whose feast day we celebrate today. I'm talking about Peter and Paul.

You'd think that the assigned readings for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul would give a preacher a little something to work with in terms of sermon ideas. You'd think that, and you'd be wrong. I looked at the readings over and over again, and they're amazingly ordinary. I got lots of great ideas for other Sundays, but aside from the fact that Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians and Peter is mentioned in the Gospel reading from Mark, nothing jumped out at me for the two of them, so I'm going to wing it a little.

I said that Peter and Paul were the odd couple. But what makes them such an odd couple? One may well have been a neat freak while the other was a slob, but if so, it's not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. For that matter, they never spent anywhere near as much time together as did Felix and Oscar.

So why do I call them "the odd couple?" Well, based on what I've just said, it's

obviously not because that they were two unusual people to be seen together. But rather, because they were two rather unlikely people to end up becoming pillars of the church. Looking at their histories, you'd probably say, "What an odd couple of guys to be chosen to spread the Gospel."

Yes. And what an odd couple of guys to end up being as influential as they were.

Let's start by looking at Peter. You probably know that his name means "rock." And let's face it, sometimes this guy could be as dumb as the rocks he was named after. Which is not to say that his heart wasn't in the right place, but he was impulsive, impetuous, and often just didn't get it.

This is the disciple who was the first to recognize Jesus as the messiah, the one who wanted to build three booths on the mountain to commemorate the transfiguration; who argued that Jesus should never have to suffer; who didn't want Jesus to wash his feet, and then wanted him to wash his whole body; and the one who after swearing that he'd never desert Jesus, did just that in the chaos of Holy Thursday and Good Friday.

This doesn't really sound like prime leadership material to me. Yet, when he

made his mistakes, he made them **big**. As Martin Luther might say, he was not afraid to "sin boldly." And, when his mistakes were pointed out to him - repeatedly - he learned from them.

Wouldn't it be nice if **we** could learn from our mistakes. Or at least be willing to admit when we're wrong.

The story is told that legendary IBM head Thomas J Watson once called an executive into his office to see him after he had made a bad business decision that had cost the company millions of dollars. After sitting down, the executive, fearing the worst, said to Watson, "I suppose you'll want my letter of resignation." Surprisingly, Watson's response was, "Don't be ridiculous! We just spent \$3 million to educate you. Now go back out there and use what you've learned so that we don't make that mistake again."

Seems to me that Watson was following the example of Jesus with Peter after the resurrection. Peter had every reason to expect to be "fired" after he had denied that he knew Jesus. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. Three times, once for each time Peter had denied him. And each time that Peter redeclared his love for Jesus, he was given greater responsibility. It's as if Jesus was saying, "I've given my life to educate you, now get to work!"

Now let's take a look at Paul. Back when he was going by the name of Saul, he was a person who was actively persecuting the church. He was the person who presided over the stoning of Stephen. How on earth did **he** get to become a pillar of the church?

Well perhaps the question answers itself. Maybe **earth** had nothing to do with it.

Surely you've all heard the saying "I saw the light." Ever wonder where it came from? I haven't checked the **Oxford English Dictionary**, the Bible of English linguists, but I'm betting that it came from Saul's experience in Damascus that changed him from being a zealous persecutor of Christians to a zealous maker of Christians.

And yet, I've tended to wonder, "why Saul?" Why not Annas, or Caiaphas, or any of the other members of the Sanhedrin? Why did Jesus see fit to confront and call **Saul** on the road to Damascus, and not any of the other Jewish leaders who were instrumental in his arrest and death?

The part of me (and it's a large part) that likes nice, logical answers conjectures that maybe it's because while the members of the Sanhedrin plotted against Jesus and his followers out of jealousy, Saul persecuted Christians entirely in good faith, believing that he was doing God's will.

And yet, that nice, logical explanation could well be dead wrong. Especially since God doesn't have to operate by rules that satisfy my standards for logic.

It's worth noting that according to what's written, after being confronted in Damascus, Saul didn't say, "But, but, but..." in an attempt to justify himself. He pretty much said, "Oops. Sorry." accepted that he was wrong, and got on with it.

Again, wouldn't it be nice if more of us could be like that?

And ironically, Paul, who states that he was a Jew's Jew, ended up traveling to all corners of the known world as the Apostle to the **Gentiles**.

It's also worth noting that just less than half of the books in the New Testament - 13 out of 27, and some of the most influential -

are attributed to this former persecutor of Christians.

In today's reading from first Corinthians, Paul writes:

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

Based on our human understanding, it would've made absolutely no sense to see Simon Peter and Saul as potential pillars of

the church. But God's understanding is fortunately much different from our understanding. He can see what we can't, and saw that these two most unlikely characters would end up becoming very influential in the spread of his good news throughout the earth.

And just think - if God can use this odd couple, then he can use us, with all our flaws and failings, too.

This is most certainly true.