

The Principle of Peter, Paul and Mary

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Laurence Johnston Peter was a Professor of Education at the University of Southern California fifty years ago. And while serving as professor there doing research he noticed a pattern that exists in generally all organizations and corporations – the best and the worst – and it was a pattern of personnel promotion that seemed nearly always to result in the same outcome. And this pattern of personnel promotion was that people in just about any organization he observed were being promoted all the way up to the level where they were ultimately incompetent. People were being promoted not for what they could do, but for what they had done. If you were a good clerk, then they promoted you to manager. If you were a good manager, they promoted you to executive. If you were a good executive they promoted you to President. You got promoted all the way to the point where the job was bigger than your talent. And then, in most cases, you got fired. You got fired for attempting to do what the organization thought you could do even though you couldn't it. This was what Laurence Johnston Peter observed and this is what he wrote about in a book called *The Peter Principle*. Clearly stated – the Peter Principle is "... every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence ... in time every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties ... (The real) work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence."

This is a humbling principle with which to begin a sermon when you are the Senior Pastor – every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence – I am looking behind me to see whether members of the staff are quietly nodding.

The truth is it is a humbling reality for all of us, correct? Countless are the conversations that you and I have been in when someone has said (and often that someone is us), “Man I could do a better job than that.” “Why even I could do that job!” You have no idea, for example, what a blessing I would be to a Major League baseball team if I was just given the chance to manage. You have no idea what a blessing I would be to our country if I was just given the chance to be President. You have no idea what a blessing I would be if I was given the chance to bring peace to the Middle East.

But the truth is you and I are limited. Each of us has a level of incompetence. And if you don’t think you’re limited then step of a cliff and see how well you fly. Find the cure for cancer. Create life. Manage the Chicago Cubs to a World Series Championship. There are some things that just can’t be done. It is the Peter Principle.

So it is the apostles Paul and Barnabas in our story this morning, without benefit of Laurence Peter’s Principle – were faced with, shall we say, a crisis of personnel promotion. These two followers of Jesus make their way to the town of Lystra and there they find a man crippled from birth. Having heard the testimony of the disciples that Jesus had healed the sick – it was the understanding of Paul and Barnabas that they were to somehow come alongside of this crippled man and bring to him a healing word. In faith to believe that the spirit of Jesus was available to all and knowing the spirit of Jesus was a healing spirit, they sensed the call to offer the healing word. Seeing in the man’s eyes an eagerness to be made well, they offered to him a healing and hopeful word. Get up and walk. And the result of the healing word was healing. Imagine that. The healing word was healing and the crippled man rose and walked. Something had happened.

So Activate Peter Principle. Time for a promotion. The Lycaonians see in Paul and Barnabas room for advancement. Let's make them gods. Zeus come down. Hermes is upon us. We are in the presence of the gods! And who could blame those Lycaonians! It's not often you see crippled men walking. Some power these guys got. Let's make them into gods. They look like humans, they talk like humans, they smell like humans – but let's make them more than what they are!! Let's promote them beyond their ability!

Now that is an amazing place to be. It's not everybody that gets a crowd thinking that they're gods. And so we hear hints of Jesus in the wilderness. Very God of Very God. In the wilderness with no fear of any Peter Principle and there comes the tempter – who dangles before him the great temptation – the great temptation we face – that we might think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. That we might take the bait and make ourselves into gods. It is such a tempting place to be. To listen to your own reviews. To read your own press. To say – well maybe they're right. Maybe I could run this show better. No Achilles' heel here!! I got this under control. Maybe I really am what they think I am.

I read a while back about the on-line marketing world and what more and more companies are being drawn to do – get people to post on their website good reviews. It's what we do, right? We go on-line to check out a hotel or a restaurant or a book to see if it has good reviews. And so now there is a cottage industry of “reviewers” who will be happy to write you a good review at a price! Fifty bucks gets you a good review. Fifty bucks gives you and everybody else a false sense of who you are. But perception is more important than reality!

But to page through the New Testament is to find person after person, character after character confronting the very possibility that they are not maybe what people think they are. Last week in our story of the good news for Gentiles – Cornelius bows down and worships Peter – and Peter says, “Whoa, whoa, wait a second. You got the wrong guy. I'm just as mortal as the rest of them.” The Lycaonians worship what they think is Zeus and Hermes. And Paul and Barnabas say, “Whoa, whoa, you got the wrong guy. We're just as mortal as the rest of them.” Page after page it is

the principle of Peter and Paul and Mary and Barnabas and James and John – people who have had to confront who they really are and realize that if the good news is to occur it's going to come through some damaged goods.

Do you imagine that about yourself? Damaged goods? A clay jar as Paul would call it. The one who called himself the least of the apostles. We have this treasure in clay jars. We are susceptible to cracking up. We have our stressor points. We may have that glaze on the surface but we can shatter at the slightest nudge. But therein lies the good news, right? Because the punch line that gets delivered over and over again in the pages of God's great story – is that it is never what we end up making of ourselves, it's what God ends up making of us.

Can you picture that early church in the wake of the resurrection and those disciples and apostles looking around at their motley crew – and saying to themselves, "He wants us to make disciples of all nations? Us? We who have just run from him, doubted him, denied him, betrayed him – and now he thinks that this is the crew that will announce the good news? Talk about the Peter Principle, the Paul Principle, the Mary Principle. And maybe that's why it got to be Mary to be the one who stumbled upon the empty tomb. Poor unqualified Mary. Demon possessed Mary. Second class woman Mary. She didn't ask for the job to be the first preacher of the Christian Church. It just so happened. God using the least likely, the least expected to bring about the power and the glory. We have this treasure in these clay jars. And maybe that's the point, Paul says, so that it can be shown that the extraordinary power belong not to us, but to God. Zeus? No. Hermes? No. Broken clay jar? Well, of course.

I love that story that Bill Harley tells about the least of the apostles. He tells about attending his son's T-ball games and watching the struggle of all different kinds of children learning to play the national pastime. And he tells of noticing a girl that he calls Tracy and how she wasn't very good and how she wore coke-bottle glasses and had a hearing aid in one ear. And how she ran clumsily and fielded non-existent. But everybody cheered for her just for the fact that she was trying. And

every time she got up to bat she would swing and miss or hit the tee and the ball would drop to the ground. But Tracy didn't much care. She was just glad to be there.

But then came the day when Tracy actually hit the ball. And not only did she hit the ball, she *really* hit the ball. And because it was Tracy at the bat all the fielders had been playing in. And by some incredible grace the ball not only squirted pass the infield but it made its way past the outfielders. The crowd went crazy. Everybody on both sides began screaming and cheering for Tracy. Run, Tracy, run! So she loped down to first base and the coach was swinging his arm wildly for her to keep going so she turned toward second and kept running. The fielders from the other team were scurrying to catch up to the ball as Tracy made her way to second. She stopped at second and the third base coach screamed for her to keep going. So she started for third and by this time in true T-ball fashion the ball was being thrown wildly and dropped plentifully and Tracy was on her way to third. Harley continues, "Adults fell out of the bleachers. "Go, Tracy, go!" Tracy reached third and stopped. Her coach stood at home plate calling her as the ball passed over the first baseman's head and landed in the fielding team's empty dugout. "Come on, Tracy! Come on, baby! Get a homerun!"

Tracy started for home, and then it happened. During the pandemonium, no one had noticed the twelve-year old geriatric mutt that had lazily settled itself down in front of the bleachers five feet from the third-base line. As Tracy rounded third, the dog, awakened by the screaming, sat up and wagged its tail at Tracy as she headed down the line. Tracy stopped. Halfway home, thirty feet from a legitimate homerun.

She looked at the dog. Her coach called, "Come on, Tracy! Come on home!" He went to his knees behind the plate, pleading. The crowd cheered, "Go, Tracy, go! Go Tracy, go!" She looked at all the adults, at her own parents shrieking and catching it all on video. She looked at the dog. The dogged wagged its tail. She looked at her coach. She looked at home. She looked at the dog. Everything went to slow motion. She went for the dog! It was a moment of complete stunned

silence. And then, applause and celebration as Tracy fell to her knees to hug the dog. Despite all the cheering to the contrary, everybody knew that Tracy had made the right choice.

We have this treasure in clay jars – the least likely can be the bearers of the surprising good news.

Did you know that you don't have to be anyone other than yourself? You don't have to be raised to your level of incompetence. You don't have to prove what you are not. You don't have to pay for a good review. It isn't you, it is Christ in you.

What was it that the rabbis would say, "Better a sinner who knows he's a sinner, than a saint who knows he's a saint?"

Or the old Hasidic tale about the rabbi named Zusya who died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. And as he waited for God to appear he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine what God was going to ask him, "Zusya, why weren't you Moses or why weren't you Solomon or why weren't you David?" But when God finally appeared the rabbi was surprised to hear God say, "Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?"

We hold this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.