

Rock and Stumbling Block

Matthew 16:13-23

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I wonder if you've ever heard of the "horse whisperer."

Monty Roberts was raised in the high prairies of the West learning to round up wild mustangs. He learned the trade from his father, a man who was prone to violence and abuse toward both Monty and the horses he broke.

Monty recalls watching his father tie new horses to a post with a bridle and rope, and then frighten them with a blanket so they would attempt to run away, jarring themselves at the end of their tether. By doing this over and over, his father would eventually break the spirit of the horse.

Monty began to think there had to be another way to train a horse. Maybe he felt like he saw something of his own experience with his father in those horses and their broken spirits, but he wanted to find some way that was more effective and more compassionate. So Monty took to the plains.

From a safe distance, Monty began to watch how wild horses communicated with each other, particularly observing the position of the lead mare as a new horse attempted to join the herd. When a young stallion tried to join the herd, the lead mare would turn toward him, flatten her ears, and look directly into his eyes — the language and posture of *challenge*.

The stallion would stop his approach and adopt the posture of a juvenile horse, a foal, by pawing the ground and bowing in submission. The mare would then turn her flank toward the new horse and lift her ears — the language and posture of *invitation*.

Now, you have to understand that this was a powerful position of vulnerability for the lead mare, because when she exposed her flank, she exposed the part of her body that a predator would might attack. It was a posture of vulnerability and openness.

The young stallion, given this *invitation*, would inch closer to the lead mare. Then the lead mare would turn towards the young stallion, flatten her ears and make direct eye contact: *challenge* again. The process of *invitation* and *challenge* would be repeated until the two would inch closer and closer and eventually touch, and at that point, the young stallion would be welcomed into the herd.

Monty began exploring whether he could replicate this process of *invitation* and *challenge* in training a horse. He found that when he acted like a lead horse, the other horses adopted a submissive posture. When he exposed his flank, the horse inched closer. He simply imitated what he saw the lead mare doing.

Today, Monty can fully train even the most abused horse in minutes, and — if you have never seen it — when the horses are brought into the training ring, the process is deeply moving to witness. His gentle “horse-whispering” as it comes to be known stands in stark contrast to his father’s harsh and abusive control (Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*, 11-12).

Now, you might be wondering why anyone would ever begin a sermon on Peter with a story about the “horse whisperer” and the finer points of equine behavior. Here’s why:

Have you ever wondered how differently someone with Peter’s personality might have turned out had Jesus not been his “trainer?”

What if Peter had been disciplined by the kind of rabbi who relied on humiliation to motivate his disciples? Peter was always sticking his foot in his mouth, so it would have been easy to humiliate him in front of his peers. But would someone like Peter have responded well to that kind of approach? I sort of doubt it.

What if someone of Peter’s particular disposition had been trained by the kind of rabbi who saw it as his job to “break” Peter’s spirit — Peter, the one who jumped in the water and swam to Jesus on the beach after the resurrection; Peter, the one who said, “Then, don’t just wash my feet, but my whole body — give me a full bath, Jesus?”

What if Jesus had tried to break his spirit? How might Peter have turned out? Would he have ever become the “rock” of the apostles... or just remained a “stumbling block?”

Between the four gospels, the book of Acts, references to Peter in Paul’s letters, and the epistles attributed to Peter himself, we have more scriptural material about Peter than any of the other twelve disciples. We may even have more material on Peter than *all* of the other disciples *combined*. In fact, Peter is mentioned in the gospels more than anyone else with the single exception of Jesus.

Throughout scripture, Peter is known by a number of names. Simon was the name his mom gave him, but he was also called *Petros* or Peter — which literally means “rock” in Greek. But most Israelite people in that day and time didn’t speak Hebrew or Greek regularly. Their everyday language was Aramaic. *Cephas* is the Aramaic word for “rock,” and that seems to be the nickname with which Paul was most familiar. He often referred to Peter as *Cephas* in his epistles. And because he was a “son of Jonas (or John),” the Baptist Greek scholar, Clarence Jordan, often playfully referred to him as “Rock, son of John” or “Rock Johnson.”

Simon. Simon Peter. Peter. Petros. Cephas. Rock. Rock Johnson. Only someone with a larger-than-life personality and *big spirit* could have garnered so many nicknames — and his charisma might be why we hear so much about Peter.

But if Peter was known as “Rock,” he was also known as “Stumbling Block.”

We heard precisely that in our scripture passage for this morning. Peter, was the first person to confess Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus praised him, saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter (*Petros*), and on this *rock (petra)* I will build my church...” (Matt. 16:17-18).

But as he so often did, just a few short verses later, Rock sticks his foot in his mouth. He apparently thought that his keen insight on the matter of the Messiah meant that he was now the resident expert on the matter. And so he saw it as his job to set Jesus straight on the subject matter: “Jesus, you’ve got it all wrong. You can’t talk like that. You can’t say things like that. You’ll lead people astray.”

But Peter’s understanding of who the Messiah was supposed to be wasn’t Jesus’ understanding. Peter thought the Messiah was to be Israel’s superhero, powerfully putting Israel back on the map, so to speak – not some Messiah that might have to suffer. Can you imagine the temptation Jesus must of have faced in that moment – to use his power to rule by force and not have to suffer?

So Jesus rebuked him, calling him the tempter: “Get behind me, Satan! You just went from *rock* to *stumbling block* – from something I can build on to the very thing that’s trying to trip me up; you aren’t setting your mind on the things of God, but on human things” (Matt. 16:23).

From rock to stumbling block in just five verses: this is supposed to be our great model of discipleship?

And, it isn’t the only time we read of one of Peter’s dramatic rises and falls.

Just a few chapters earlier in Matthew, the disciples were caught in the middle of a storm at sea. Waves and winds battered the boat. Jesus walked out on the water in the middle of the storm to meet them, and Peter, in a moment of profound faith, said to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” said Jesus, and for the briefest moment, Peter’s faith allowed him to walk on water, too. But then the strong winds and the waves and fear got the better of his faith and he began to sink (Matt. 14:28-31).

From full-of-faith to full-of-fear in mere seconds. From walking on water to sinking like a rock. Do you see how extreme his swings can be?

In yet another critical moment, he says to Jesus, “Even if I must die with you, I will not *deny* you!” (Matt. 26:35). But then, just a few verses later, Peter stands next to a fire in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ home, and what does Peter do? He *denies* Jesus three times.

Are you starting to get a feel for the pattern of Peter’s discipleship? High to low, high to low – following Peter’s growth as a disciple of Jesus is like riding a roller coaster! As

soon as you think he's reached the highest high, the bottom drops out, and he's starting all over again.

I suspect that some of us feel a whole lot like Peter when we look back at our own faith journeys. So often our journeys are marked by mountain-top highs and deep-valley lows. We sometimes think that we have the kind of faith that allow us to walk on water, only to find ourselves feeling like we are sinking into the depths just a few moments later.

But there's something about Peter's journey and his growth, even if it was like a rollercoaster, that inspires hope in me. I think it's because Peter never gave up. He never stayed down for long. He seemed willing to learn from his mistakes, which is sometimes more than I can say for myself.

How many times must I learn the hard way not to judge a book by its cover?

How many times must I learn that relationships and not things are the most important part of life?

How many times must I be a stumbling block to someone else before I'll learn to temper my "advice?"

Sometimes I think that I might just spend the entirety of my life trying to learn the same few lessons over and over and over. But Peter's life inspires me, I think, to realize that the goal of life is not merely to get by or simply survive, but to *grow*.

And most often, growth comes not when we're successful, but when we fail — because failure demands change if we are to expect different results. It demands we change the way we think, change the way we behave, change our expectations, and, maybe most importantly, that we let go of our over-inflated assessment of ourselves and realize there is always more room to grow.

A woman named Rosemary D'arcy became something of a campus icon at a small, Rhode Island college because she had gone back to school to finish her bachelor's degree at the age of 87. Over her time there, the students grew to love her. And at the close of the semester, the student body asked Rosemary to speak at their end of the year banquet.

So she came up to the podium, and she had these little index cards that she was shuffling. Just as she got to the podium, she dropped them all onto the floor. And this bears repeating verbatim because it gives you a great feel for her wit. At that moment, she said: "I'm sorry. I gave up beer for lent, and the whiskey is killing me."

Then she went on to say this:

“I will never get these cards back in order, so just let me tell you what I know. We do not stop playing because we are old; we grow old because we stop playing. If you are nineteen-years old and lay in bed for one full year and don’t do one productive thing, you will still turn twenty-years old. If I am 87-years old and lay in bed for one year and never do anything, I will turn 88. Anybody can grow older. That doesn’t take any talent or ability. The idea is to grow *up* by always finding the opportunity in change.”

According to church tradition, Peter did grow up – never into perfection, but he did grow into a full spiritual maturity.

One of the very unique things that we know about Peter is that – as far as we know – he was the only one of the Twelve who was married. We know this because of the time when Jesus, early on in his ministry, healed Peter’s mother-in-law at Peter’s house (Mk. 1:30-31).

And, in 1 Corinthians, Paul actually mentions that Peter’s wife accompanied Peter on his missionary journeys (9:5). Church tradition tells us that her name was Perpetua. It also tells us that both Peter and Perpetua were ultimately martyred for the faith. In fact, the ancient church historian, Eusebius, recorded that at the end of their lives Peter was made to watch his wife be crucified before his own crucifixion.

And do you know what his last words to her were? Peter is said to have called out to her: “Remember the Lord!”

Remember the Lord, the One who will not forget you.

How did Jesus know? How did he know Peter’s potential? How did he know Peter could lead the Twelve, could build the church, could be the “rock?”

I’m reminded of the story of a sculptor who was commissioned to create a statue of Abraham Lincoln for the library of a little college in the midwest. Sculpting is a tedious, time-consuming process – just a little chip of rock here and a little chip of rock there; try to take too much and you’re likely to send a crack through the base and ruin the stone.

Well, the sculptor carefully chipped away at the stone, day by day, over the course of several months. He did this work in a studio, where a woman came to sweep up the chips every night, and she enjoyed noticing the progress of his work. After a long time, the statue was almost finished, and the sculptor was surprised to find this woman still at his studio when he arrived one morning. She had stayed all night just to speak to him.

She told him, “I think what you have done is absolutely wonderful, and I stayed to tell you that, but I want to ask you something, too. How did you know that Mr. Lincoln was in that stone?” (John Claypool, *The First to Follow*, 24).

I often want to ask Jesus the same question about Peter: how did you know that *he* was in that rock?

But maybe the better question is: what does Jesus see in *this* rock? Or in *that* rock? Or *that* rock? Or *that* one? Or in you?

Maybe what we ought to be asking isn't "What did Jesus see in Peter?" but "What does Jesus see in me?"

I think that's the good news of Peter's life for us today: Peter inspires the hope that the Holy One will not abandon us even when we are slow to learn.

And in that way, Peter's story is our story, because God is still at work chipping away, one tap at a time, sculpting us into the person God always intended for us to be. Slow though we may be, God is at work shaping us from stumbling blocks into cornerstones on which Christ can build the church.

Thank God for Peter, because through his life we can see that God is always more interested in our future than in our past.

Amen.