



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Socratic Paradox of Faith”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

John 13: 1-11; Acts 10: 9-16

It seems to me that one of the great lessons we learn in life is the clarity we gain on how much we thought we knew versus how much we actually do. In comparing his wisdom to the common person, Socrates is said to have proclaimed, ‘Although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is – for he knows nothing, and thinks he knows. I neither know nor think I know.’ It’s a notion often summarized in the aphorism, ‘The heart of wisdom is knowing what one doesn’t know!’

It seems to follow a pattern of what in statistics might be referred to as a skewed distribution curve. Early in our lives, there is this brief period of time in which our self-perceived knowledge and wisdom is relatively low, and we are openly and actively taking in the input and advice of parents, grandparents, teachers, and many others. With each year that passes, however, that sense ‘knowing’ begins to climb more and more until we hit those pubescent years and our self-assurance sky-rockets to that point in which we absolutely know that no one else – especially our parents – has any clue as to the ‘whats’ and ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of life, because we obviously know best. We tend to level off at that summit for a while until slowly (sometimes in our late teens, far too often not until we’re well into our late 20’s), we begin what is a decade’s long descent in which we learn, year after year, how much we really don’t know about all of those things of which we used to be so certain.

It is a journey through which what we once believed to be the wisdom of knowing everything gives way to the true wisdom of understanding just how much we don’t. It is, I think, a fairly common pattern of the human experience. It is in Peter, however, that I think we are reminded that it is not quite as natural a pattern in these journeys of faith that we travel with God.

There is a lot that we can draw from this story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in John 13. We had a great conversation in our Bible discussion this past Wednesday morning as we explored thoughts and perspectives in the realms of both the spiritual and day-to-day living. And, if you read on through the rest of chapter 13 there is a lot more about the manner in which this action by Jesus serves as the model for how we engage with this world and those in it. The moment that drew my attention for this morning, however, is that exchange between Peter and Jesus in verses 6 through 10.

You get this image of Jesus, in John 13, making his way around the room, kneeling at the feet of one disciple after the next, washing their feet of the dirt and dust that accumulated along their

journey. Some, we might presume, are feeling honored, and perhaps a bit surprised, by what Jesus is doing here. This isn't the expected behavior of a teacher or an honored guest – much less someone of Jesus' importance. There's likely some confusion in the room, and maybe even a bit of discomfort as they all look towards one another with trepidation and uncertainty. But, Jesus presses on until he makes his way around to Peter, who doesn't hold back as the others have. 'That's not happening!' Peter proclaims. 'If you want any part with me,' Jesus replies, 'yes, it is' 'Fine.' Peter goes on, 'but then you need to wash my hands and head as well.' Now, the exchange goes on from there, and while it never says so specifically, we get the sense that Peter relents and allows things to play out as Jesus had intended, but it's that moment of Peter rebuffing Jesus' efforts that I want to point towards this morning, because it's not the first, nor the last, time this happened!

Earlier in the ministry of Jesus, both Matthew and Mark have that story of Jesus calling Peter Satan. Why? Because Jesus was explaining to his disciples the crucifixion and resurrection that was to come, and Peter jumped in and started telling Jesus that such a thing could never take place. Then, just a matter of hours after this foot washing exchange, we find Jesus and his disciples in the garden, face to face with Judas and that detachment of soldier, and what happens? As Jesus submits to the authorities to turn himself in, Peter jumps in the middle of things, draws his sword, and cuts off another man's ear. This is a recurring pattern with Peter – one way or another getting in the way of what Jesus is trying to do – and it doesn't stop here.

The second reading I listed for us this morning takes us well beyond the night of Jesus' arrest, past the resurrection, and into those earliest years of the life of the Church. The tenth chapter of the book of Acts opens with a Roman centurion in Caesarea who has a vision of an angel of God instructing him to send men to greet Peter in Joppa and beckon Peter to come and visit Caesarea, and it's as those representatives of Cornelius are on their way to find Peter in Joppa that we pick up our second reading in verse 9 of Acts 10.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now, the story goes on from there as Peter receives those representatives sent by Cornelius, accepts their offer to return to Caesarea, and embraces the mission of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles – which is what that whole vision was about in the first place. I can't ignore, however, that it's another moment of Peter trying to tell God – to tell Jesus – what to do! Yes, he eventually gave in, but not before he objected to God's will three times. Peter – arguably Jesus' closest confidant, and the one who represented the faithfulness on which the future of the Church would be built – rebuked Jesus when he foretold his crucifixion, rebuffed Jesus when Jesus knelt to wash his feet, ignored Jesus by drawing his sword in the garden that night, and then rejected God three times before finally accepting the path that God was laying before him. This man –

this pinnacle of faith – repeatedly stood in the way of what Jesus was trying to do, and in each and every case it was for one reason: Peter was convinced that he knew better!

To be clear, Peter wasn't malicious, selfish, indulgent, or otherwise contemptible in any real way in these moments. In fact, you can readily look towards his actions with understanding, respect, and even admiration.

- When Peter proclaimed that Jesus couldn't be allowed to die, he was coming from a place of love for Jesus and hope for all that Jesus was accomplishing in this world.
- When Peter rebuffed Jesus' attempt to wash his feet, he did so out of a clear understanding of who he was in relation to who Jesus was, and out of an attempt to respect the fact that he should be the one kneeling at the feet of Jesus.
- When Peter ignored Jesus' attempt to peacefully surrender that night, he did so in the hopes of defending a man who he believed needed to survive to fulfill his role as the Messiah that Peter knew Jesus was born to be.
- And, when Peter kept rejecting God's command in that vision, it was out of a pure sense of duty to his understanding of what it meant to be faithful to God.

This recurring pattern for Peter, in which he keeps finding himself going toe-to-toe with Jesus, isn't born in narcissism, in self-indulgence, or really in any of the many human characteristics that so quickly define us all. This recurring pattern for Peter, grounded in very commendable and faith-filled understandings of the moments in which he found himself, is born in Peter's subconscious and yet consistent attempt to assert that he knows better than God. And that, I want to suggest, is a line we all tend to cross more often than we realize.

When we talk about that Socratic Paradox of knowing that we don't know things, we can look towards that fairly common human experience of self-assured certainty in our youth that gives way to the wisdom of understanding our own limitations in the years that follow. When it comes to our faith, however, I'm not sure we fall into that same pattern. I'm not sure we quite embrace the Socratic Paradox when it comes to our discipleship. And, most simply, I think we are all a lot more like Peter than we tend to acknowledge.

Just take a moment to consider, honestly, how often you come before God with a mindset akin to that of Peter throughout his journey.

- How often do you come to God looking for help in doing something instead of looking for clarity on what to do?
- How often do you approach God with a request to be granted instead of a life to be guided?
- How often do you read Scripture in a way that affirms your perspectives instead of looking for the ways in which it challenges you to consider new ways and understandings?

To be sure, I don't think there is anything wrong with letting God know our wants. That's ok. The question, however, is the mindset behind it. There is a huge between Jesus in the garden praying, 'Take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done,' and Peter saying, 'yeah... that's not gonna happen!' There is a huge difference between owning with God what we might wish for and approaching God as though we are the ones who know best.

In what I have for today coined the ‘Socratic Paradox of faith,’ what I’m talking about is our human reluctance to embrace the wisdom that stems from knowing that which we don’t know. From our concepts of God, to our understanding of Scripture, to our decisions on how we will live out these lives of faith to which we are called, we are all like Peter far more often than we tend to acknowledge, and we would all be well-suited to step back and embrace the wisdom that stems from knowing that which we don’t know.

In life, we seem to learn that lesson with reasonable predictability. We all go through that decade or so of fierce independence in which we are convinced that we know best, but most of us then start to get it, and the understanding grows for the decades to follow. In faith, for some reason, it just seems a bit harder. It’s counter-intuitive, as we all went through a stage in which we claimed we know better than our parents, only to learn later that we didn’t. And yet, none of us would actually claim that we know better than God, but still so often act as though we do. It seemed that Peter struggled with that understanding throughout his life, and again and again it brought him toe-to-toe with Jesus calling him out for it. I just sometimes wish we could somehow learn that lesson, ourselves, a bit more easily than we do.