

St. Peter and St. Paul. They're the two most important apostles in the early Church.

St. Peter started life as Simon bar Jonah. But Jesus gave him a nickname. Cephas is the Greek form, Peter comes from Latin. But in English it's Rock, or maybe better, Rocky. As we heard last Sunday, Jesus called Simon the fisherman to leave his nets and become Peter who would fish for people.

St. Paul, our patron saint, as we heard today, started out as Saul the Pharisee, Saul the great persecutor of the early church. But after an encounter with the risen Christ on the Road to Damascus, he became Paul, the greatest missionary and church planter in the early church. He was also the most important theologian in early Christianity.

Peter and Paul were very different. And yet their complimentary gifts form a sort of yin and yang pattern for the early church. Together, they are hugely important.

Thus Peter and Paul are the only apostles who have 2 feasts each on the church calendar.

They actually share one feast day. June 29 every year is the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles. But every January each of them has a second feast day, one week apart.

January 18 is the Feast of the Confession of St. Peter the Apostle. This day always commemorates Peter giving a good answer. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They give him lots of different answers. Then he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter gives the answer, "You are the Messiah (You are the Christ), the son of the Living God."¹ This statement is a profession, or a confession of faith. It gives the name to the feast day, The Confession of St. Peter.

A week after January 18, on January 25 every year, we celebrate the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. It celebrates Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and Paul's subsequent conversion to Christianity.

Here at St. Paul's on the Plains, since Paul is our patron saint, we usually transfer the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul to the Sunday before or the Sunday afterward, which is why we're observing it today.

I love Peter and Paul both for their faith, and their flaws. I love them for what ties them together, as well as for the fact that they had to struggle through disagreements.

Peter and Paul were the yin and yang of the early church. They were almost polar opposites in many ways. Yet, they were both important leaders, and together they laid much of the foundation for the early church.

¹ See slightly different versions: Mt 16:16, Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20

Peter was working class. He was a fisherman, which required some physical strength. Since fishing boats weren't cheap, in our culture we would probably say that Peter was a co-owner of a small business.

Peter does not seem to be highly educated. And in the New Testament, the stories about him often show him acting impulsively. He doesn't seem to be a deep thinker, and he doesn't always think things through. He tends to lead with his heart and his gut, rather than his head. Sometimes, that style is helpful. After Peter blurts out a heartfelt answer, after he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."²

But just a few verses later, Peter blurts out that Jesus should not die on the cross, and Jesus has to take him down a notch: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me."³ Peter, Cephas, Rocky, is the Rock foundation of the early church. But he's also a stumbling block, a rock that can be tripped over.

Perhaps that nickname of Rocky is apt. I see in Peter a lot of the characteristics of the movie character Rocky Balboa. A good heart. But not a deep thinker. Sometimes he does the right thing. And sometimes he gets himself into trouble.

Paul on the other hand was a VERY deep thinker. He had a trade he could fall back on. He was a tent-maker, which meant that he was also a leather worker, since tents back then tended to be made of leather, not canvas. But Paul was also highly educated. He was trained as a Pharisee. One of his teachers was Gamaliel, who is still venerated by the Jews as one of their greatest rabbis. And Paul many letters show that not only was Paul trained in Jewish thought, but that he was also highly trained in Greco-Roman philosophy and rhetoric as well.

We heard Paul's own words in our Epistle reading today from Galatians. He says, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors."⁴ He thus admits to being both highly trained intellectually, as well as something of a fanatic.

But after his conversion experience, Paul went from being a fanatical enemy of Christianity to becoming one of its most ardent proponents.

But this change didn't happen overnight. Yes, Paul had that moment on the Damascus road when he had a blinding vision of the Risen Jesus. It knocked him to the ground literally and figuratively. And we still talk about a "Road to Damascus" experience as one of sudden change.

But as we heard in Galatians, Paul had to really wrestle and struggle with this experience both intellectually and spiritually. He didn't just flick a switch. In fact, he says in

² Mt 16:18

³ Mt 16:23

⁴ Gal 1:14

Galatians that he struggled with the ramifications of this experience for 3 years before he was ready to go out and begin his great missionary work.⁵

But when he was ready to begin his ministry, he went all in. He traveled thousands of miles and took many risks and suffered a number of hardships in order to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And he would later say that he regarded everything else in life, even his own intellectual abilities and education, as nothing but rubbish, nothing but garbage, when compared to the immense great value of know Jesus Christ as his Lord.

Peter and Paul were very different. And yet they were both important to the early church. They intersected at several point. As we heard today in Galatians, Paul went to meet Peter early on to learn more about Jesus.⁶

But in the next chapter of Galatians, Paul talks about finding himself in sharp disagreement with Peter over an incident in Antioch, in what today is south central Turkey.

Paul says in no uncertain terms, "When Cephas (or Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face."⁷ I won't go into all the ins and outs of their disagreements. But I do find it helpful to remember that the early Christians did not agree on everything, and yet they found a way to remain in fellowship with each other in spite of their differences.

We don't know how many other times Paul and Peter might have interacted. There is a famous line from the Second Epistle of Peter about the writings of "our beloved brother Paul,"⁸ though it goes on to say, "there are some things in (Paul's letters that are) hard to understand."⁹

But Paul and Peter will wind up tied together in one other way. They will both be executed in Rome about the same time. Paul, a Roman citizen, is given the quick, clean death of being decapitated. Peter is sentenced to a much more painful and lingering death by crucifixion.

But within 3 decades of their deaths, they are celebrated together. The First Epistle of Clement is one of the two oldest Christian writings that is not included in the New Testament.¹⁰ 1 Clement just missed the cut of being included in the New Testament. And it was written about the same time as the Gospel of John and Revelation.

Clement was the 4th Bishop of Rome, and later would be known as the 4th Pope, though that term wasn't used during his time.

⁵ See Gal 1:18

⁶ Again, see Gal 1:18

⁷ Gal 2:11

⁸ 2Pet 3:15

⁹ 2Pet 3:16

¹⁰ The other is *The Didache*

But about 30 years after Peter and Paul's deaths, Clement speaks of them together as "The greatest and most righteous pillars of the Church."¹ Clement then goes on to say a number of things praising Peter, and then Paul. I won't go into those this morning.

But it is evidence that from the earliest days of the church, Peter and Paul, despite their flaws, were regarded as important Pillars in Christianity. Very different men. Very different gifts. Not always in agreement. But both working together to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

May we be inspired by their example.

And may we continue to build upon the foundation they have laid.

¹ 1Clement 5:2