

“A Different Side of Peter” / Acts 2:14a, 36-41 / 4 May 2014

Let me get this straight. The Apostle Peter stands up and preaches a fiery sermon, the blame-filled, impassioned kind of sermon that used to be called a “jeremiad.” He says, “You crucified Jesus. Repent and be baptized! Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!” And as a result of this hellfire homily, 3,000 people join his church? And voila! It's the birth a faith that would become the world's largest religion. Maybe jeremiads are the way to go. But look how Peter has finally, finally found his voice! Bumbling, ham-fisted, old Peter, the guy who had to fill every silent moment with nervous chatter, look how he's finally come into his own. This is a different side of Peter. He's no longer afraid. Would that you and I could find that side of ourselves! To be no longer afraid, to find our voices, and to say with courage and genuineness the things we need to say! It's our genuineness that the world desires.

I recently saw a skit from the TV show *Portlandia* that made fun of the way some churches are trying to rebrand themselves just to get people in the doors. The sketch is a pretend TV commercial that occasionally addresses you, the television audience, and occasionally has the characters muttering to each other—in the *Saturday Night Live* style. It's called “Church Is an Option,” and it includes Fred Armisen as an altar boy; he's the guy who always used to play Barack Obama on *Saturday Night Live*. There's a nun with headdress similar to the hat that Sallie Field wore in that old show, *The Flying Nun*, and a benevolent if uncertain priest in late middle age. At the beginning of the commercial, the priest says to viewers, “When looking for peace and tranquility (and massage, and yoga, and acupuncture), remember...church is an option.” The priest smirks and shrugs as if he's just burped or said or done something a little embarrassing. Then, in the priest's office, flanked by altar boy and nun: “Hi, I'm Father Timothy. Organized religion is stuffy and dogmatic, right? What do you want, disorganized? We can do that.” The three of them start trying to prove that they can be disorderly, tearing up sheet music, pulling tape off the roll, throwing away the books.

“Nobody wants to pray anymore,” Father Timothy commiserates. “Okay. We can do vision boards if you like.” He points to a collage where cutout pictures from magazines are glued to a sheet of poster board. “Cars,” he says. “Husbands. This husband is making sushi. A dream vacation.” The priest goes on to say, “Please, consider us an option. Keep us in mind on Sundays, any day! Not only Sunday. Friday, Saturday, just call me. I'll come down whenever you want. We listen to you.” Next you see the priest playing the organ. He looks over his shoulder and says, “Organ music...kind of lame. Hey! How about some rock-n-roll?” The nun and altar boy pull out acoustic guitars, the priest sits down at the drums; they try to make rock music, as elderly bingo ladies sway in the background. Their rock-n-roll sounds a little bit like “Kum Ba Yah,” proving once again what I've been saying for twenty years: putting drums in a church does not contemporary music make. The next scene is the priest's study. A woman is lying face down on a table. “Looking for a sense of peace and tranquility?” Father Timothy asks. “I can put a needle in your back.” He hesitantly pulls a sewing needle out of a pin cushion—the kind your grandmother had, shaped like a tomato—and he sticks it in the lady's back. “There! Does that feel soothing?” The woman nods yes. “It does? Wow.” The priest breathes a sigh of relief and mutters, “Beginner's luck.”

“I get nothing out of this,” Father Timothy says. “I'm just trying to help you.” The sketch closes with a scene in the priest's office. Fred Armisen, the altar boy, is on the phone. He turns to the priest and says, “What time do we offer acupuncture?” The priest says, “2 o'clock, but tell them we'll schedule around them, anytime they want.” Turning back to the phone, the altar boy says, “Um, yeah, we have all kinds of needles.” Father Timothy interrupts, “They're not special needles. Just

tell 'em we have needles.” The nun says, “I think you do need special needles for acupuncture,” and the priest replies dismissively, “They don't have to be.”

Of course, the point of the skit is clear. Some churches will do just about anything to appeal to people out there in the world. They'll meet in gymnasiums. They'll try their hand at music that they don't really understand. They'll give up the word “church” altogether and instead label themselves “worship centers” or “Christian centers.” They'll trade their dignity, and their beauty, their traditions and their whole identity for a chance at survival. Instead of being who they are and doing what they know how to do, they'll be whoever or whatever they think you want them to be. But in the process, they lose the respect of the very people they're trying to attract. Now, I agree with the fictitious Father Timothy that the church needs to keep up with the times, always finding fresh, compelling ways to speak our truth to an ever-changing world around us. And yet, I'm drawn to the Apostle Peter that we see today in the Book of Acts. He's not peddling acupuncture or massage; he's simply being himself...but in a way we've never seen before.

You've changed, Peter the Apostle! You're no longer the endearingly awkward, sweet-tempered guy who gets everything wrong and never stops talking. No, you've become impassioned, bold. Is it that you've changed, or is it that you've come into yourself? The old Peter was a lot like Father Timothy, needy and prattling. But today we see a different side of Peter; at last he's speaking words that the world wants to hear. Remember how he cringed and cowered before a little girl on the night of Jesus' arrest. “I don't know Jesus. Just leave me alone.” Today he's speaking his truth with boldness and power. And people find his new genuineness so compelling that 3,000 join his church. When they heard Peter speaking, the text says, people were “cut to the heart.” Isn't that what people want from their faith, from their friends, from their movies, and their books, and their music? People want things that will cut straight to their hearts. In the end, it's not more entertainment or more coddling that people want. We need things that will speak straight to our hearts. Genuineness! The people in our lives long for genuineness.

Speaking of gimmicks that pastors use to get people interested in church, at my last congregation, we used to host a movie night at the manse. Once a month, we would select a film that we believed talked about important issues relevant to faith. We would invite people to watch the film on Saturday night and discuss it in the adult class the following day. Once I picked the movie *Crash*. It was a pretty daring choice, considering the foul language and sexual content. But *Crash* is a powerful movie that deals with themes of race, and privilege, and anger...and loneliness. After the movie, one elderly fellow shook his head at me sadly and said, “You're stirring the pot, reverend.” And he might have been right. But I was young and idealistic.

The movie opens with this quote: “In any real city, you walk, you brush past people, and people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. We crash into each other just to feel that touch.” I've only spent very little time in Los Angeles, and admittedly, most of that time was in a car. I don't recall much in the way of sidewalks, or front porches, or shared public space where people could come into human contact with each other. But it's not just in California that people feel disconnected from each other, and thus disconnected from God. We're disconnected from a lot of life-giving things that used to provide strength and solace to people of previous generations. We're disconnected from our communities, of course, because we have so little free time that we can't sit out on the front porch anymore and share the evening with neighbors passing by. Even if we have front porches, we're more likely to rally the family and sit on the deck out back, where no one can intrude on what little time we get to spend together. Last summer, I called the central line for the West Virginia state parks to make a reservation, and I was

astonished, truly amazed, when a living, breathing woman answered the phone. She said, “West Virginia State Parks, this is Laura. How may I help you?” I said, “Laura? You're not an answering machine?” And Laura said, “No, sir.” And then the selfsame woman who answered the phone took my reservation.

But in our times, that's quite rare. These are the days when we feel anonymous more than half the time: in our cars, at our computers, sometimes even in our homes. These are the days when computer-automated voices call us up in the middle of dinner and ask us to “continue holding.” These are the days when the good causes we support share our names and addresses with other good causes, resulting in a deluge of emails, and letters, and phone calls from organizations that call us by name and pretend to know us. When we're relieved and happy just to get another human being on the other end of the phone line, then something in our lifestyle has spun out of control. People long for healthful contact with other human beings, community, genuineness, to know and be known, to share life in its trials and joys, to love and be loved.

I met a woman in the city just this past Friday, and she had never even visited our church, but she said “I've always heard that Bower Hill is a church with 300 deacons.” That's to say, all the members of the church are engaged in care for the world. I didn't have the heart to tell her that there are more like 270 of us nowadays! If the Book of Acts is any gauge of human psychology—and I believe that in some ways it is—then it's always been true that people can sense phoniness, but respond to a human touch, human passion, real human genuineness. The life of faith calls us, like Peter, to a place where we're finally able to push our defenses aside—in his case it was all the senseless chatter—and to put our own unique humanity to work for the sake of the world around us. Look around your life, your relationships, the cast of characters whose faces people your days. All of them long for someone to see them and perhaps even to speak to their hearts. In what ways does your genuineness shine out to warm the people around you? In what ways do you conceal it and deny the world the joy of knowing it? If God comes to us in a human life in Jesus, then human lives must be God's favorite vehicle. It takes so little, really, just to be real with people, to see them, to hear them, to love them. It's our genuineness that the world desires. Amen.