

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 21:15-19, Acts 9:1-6, Galatians 1

“Renovations”

Do you remember the old program “This Old House” with Bob Villa? I used to watch that every Saturday on PBS and marvel at the work that these skilled craftspeople did – transforming a real “junker” into a palace. Now I peek in at some of the renovation programs that my wife Marilyn watches on HGTV – it is amazing how they can turn a wreck into a palace - talk about making a silk purse from a sow’s ear! It is purely incredible what a master craftsman or woman can do with the right prospect and the right tools.

When you think about it – the two saints that we celebrate today, Peter and Paul are certainly renovation projects from the ground up – reworked by THE Master. Both Simon Peter, also known as Cephas (which is rock in Aramaic and in Greek - the word Petra) and Paul – the rabbi formerly known as Saul of Tarsus – are renovations after being at the lowest point in their lives – and transformed by Jesus and the Holy Spirit into two of the most important leaders of Christ’s One, Holy, and Apostolic Church.

Today’s Holy Gospel brings us to the shore of the Sea of Galilee for a scene between Jesus and Peter which is one of the most spectacular interchanges in the whole Bible, quite possibly in all of literature. The most remarkable thing about it is that, by way of forgiveness, Jesus gives Peter a job to do. When Peter professes his love, Jesus doesn’t say, ‘Well, okeydoke - all right, then.’ Instead Jesus says, *“feed my lambs..., take care of my sheep..., and then feed my sheep.”* The three questions of *“Simon, son of John, (Simon Bar Jonah) do you love me?”* correspond to Peter’s three denials. At both the denials and the renovation – there is a roaring fire.

I can only imagine how the smell of the fire Jesus made that morning, preparing breakfast for the apostles must have triggered the thought of the smell of the charcoal in the courtyard of the high priest – along with the denials during Peter’s night of agony – and also of Jesus’ own night of agony. It is because of what Jesus went through that Peter’s denials can be dealt with. Jesus is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Peter’s sin, your sin, and my sin. The taking away of sin varies from individual to individual, and from case to case. Jesus goes right to where the pain is, as He so often does. He takes Simon Peter away from the others and John, the beloved disciple is following them at a safe distance. They are probably walking slowly along the stony shore of the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus asks the question that goes to the very heart of it all: *“Do you truly love me more than these?”* Notice that the words vary slightly each time. When Peter replies to Jesus the word he uses for ‘love’ is different from the one Jesus uses in the first two questions. Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him - using the word for the “agape” kind of unconditional love – and incredible kind of love - no matter what. It is sort of like when you think of your dog or puppy could tear apart the pillows on the couch but you are still going to love that pet – without question. Or like our children – when they take a container of cereal and decide to make it snow, and then they look and see what they have done – you can’t really get mad at them – you can tell them that they have done something wrong, but you are not going to stop loving them – no matter what. Peter responds using the word which is

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the brotherly kind of love - φιλω̄ - (philo). We all know that one – the city of brotherly love is Philadelphia. Peter is answering with a brotherly love – but Jesus is asking with the love of Almighty God – that loves without question. Then, in the third question, Jesus uses the word that Peter had been using. What is truly important is that the same question was being asked three times – with subtle differences. What matters is that when the question is asked by Jesus and answered by Peter - Jesus replies each time with a command, a challenge, and a new commission for Peter. Jesus is trusting Peter to get back to fruitful work, and to turn his love for Jesus to new horizons. Jesus is sharing his own work, his own ministry, with Peter –and in doing so He is transforming Peter from a fisherman to a shepherd. In Jesus’ questioning of Peter – He is showing us that as followers, believers and members of the Body of Christ –then somewhere, deep down inside, we have a love for Jesus, and though we might let him down enough times, He wants to find that love, to give us a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give us a new work to do. We cannot ‘earn’ the forgiveness - nothing can ever do that. It is purely “grace!” Peter will complete his task as a shepherd by laying down his own life, in turn, for Jesus’ sheep, crucified upside down, because he did not want to be crucified like Jesus, his Lord and Savior. Jesus then repeats the call that got the Apostles on board in the first place - *‘Follow me!’* Peter wasn’t perfect, he was still muddled from time to time, as the Book of Acts tells us but he became a shepherd who loved Jesus and looked after his sheep. Like the other Apostles he became even stronger once the Holy Spirit descended upon them in that room on the Day of Pentecost. And what happened? This shepherd went out into the city of Jerusalem and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified, buried and risen from the dead. 3,000 people accepted Jesus that day and were baptized. They accepted Jesus as Lord. No one could ask for more. He was Jesus’ remarkable renovation and transformation project!

Another renovation project was someone who dedicated his every breath to catching and persecuting Jesus’ followers – his name was Saul of Tarsus. Please open your Pew Bibles to page 1705 – to Acts Chapter 9. Right at the very beginning of this chapter you can sense the very air of evil that was motivating Saul. He asks the high priest for permission, in writing, to go to synagogues in Damascus – so that he could bring followers of the Way (as Jesus’ disciples were called – not having been named Christians until later – in Antioch) into custody and bring them back to Jerusalem. Look at verse 3 – *"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him." "He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied." "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.""* (Acts 9:3-6)

Suddenly Saul’s whole world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and blindness - swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing *‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah’* (2 Corinthians 4:6), and to show that this was something he shared with all Christians, he described it as God shining *‘in our hearts,’* He makes it clear that his vision was unique, a seeing, like Stephen in his death, which involved the coming together of heaven and earth, earthly eyes seeing the heavenly reality. *‘Am I not an apostle?’* he

wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:1). *'Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?'* But this 'seeing' went far, far beyond a qualification for the office of 'Apostle.' It confirmed everything that Saul had been taught; but at the same time it overturned everything he had previously been taught. The law and the prophets had been fulfilled; but to him the law and the prophets had been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way. It was a whole new world for Saul! It showed him that the God in whose name and for whose honor he was busy rounding up those who were declaring that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, that He was risen from the dead, that He was the Lord of the world – it showed him that the God he had been right to serve, right to study, right to seek in prayer, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had done what He always said He would do, but did it in a shocking way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person - in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Everything that Saul of Tarsus said and did from that moment on, and particularly everything that he wrote, flowed from that sudden, shocking encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul sank to the ground, blinded by the light, with the words ringing in his head. *'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'* Did you catch that? Somehow, by dragging off to prison these men and women - Saul was persecuting Jesus and those He loves; His family. It was all too much. They led him by the hand because he was blind and brought him to Damascus. It was three days before he could do anything except, simultaneously, recoil from the horror of what had happened and gasp at its glory. We call this event a 'conversion', but it was more like a volcanic eruption, a thunderstorm and tidal wave all coming together. If the death and resurrection of Jesus is the hinge on which the 'great door of history' swung open at last, then the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was the moment when all the ancient promises of God gathered themselves up, rolled themselves into a ball, and came hurtling through that open door and out into the wide world beyond.

Saul – who was renamed Paul wrote to the people of Galatia about the Gospel that he preached – and how he came to receive it – also confessing about his former ways. He says it took him three years to totally unpack what Jesus had given to him – I like to think of it as a massive download. God out into Saul's mind all of the truth about Jesus. It took him 3 years to sort it out and then after three years the Gospel he received was verified in Jerusalem as the same Gospel taught by those men who walked side by side with Jesus. *"I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up." "I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it." (Galatians 1:11-13)*

Like the projects of Bob Villa – in which he dismantled each house – to reclaim and renovate them into solid dwellings – so Jesus can take even the worst sinner, the worst enemy, or someone like us - and spiritually dismantle and restore, refresh and renew them into faithful followers, even leaders in the Body of Christ. Remember Paul's own words in Romans 8:28 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* God even used two murderers – Moses and David – to be forgiven and restored champions for His glory. And God used Peter and Paul to grow His

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church from its' very persecuted beginnings – to be the Body of Christ in the Roman Empire- and as Jesus calls us to be His renovation as well - "*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" (Act 1:8)