

Our mixed bag of life

What do you see when you look at yourself these days? What stands out for you? And what do you wish you could hide? What do you want others to see? And what's the last thing you want them to see?

I ask those questions because I think it's easy to take one aspect or quality of ourselves, a particular time in life, a choice or a series of decisions, something that's happened to us or something we've done or left undone and let that, for better or worse, define and identity us. Maybe we see ourselves as a one hit wonder or a three time loser.

There have been times when I've felt like I was the worst thing that I had ever done or the most painful thing that had ever happened to me. And other times I've felt like I was my best accomplishment or success. I've not only seen myself in those ways. Sometimes that's how I've seen others. Maybe you know what I'm talking about. Maybe you've felt those things too and seen yourself or another like that.

It's as if we take a snapshot of life, hold it up and say, "This is the reality." Well, maybe it is at that moment, in that place, under those circumstances, or maybe it's not. Either way life is much more like a movie than a single photograph.

That means we are neither our best day nor our worst day. We are neither our flaws nor our virtues. None of us are ever just one thing. All of us are a mixture. If there's anyone in scripture who makes that point it is Peter. He's a mixed bag. But so am I. I suppose you are too. And yet, in today's gospel Jesus says to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

I've often thought that Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" is the rock on which Jesus builds his church and the reason Peter is given the keys of the kingdom. Peter got the answer right. But his confession happened at a particular moment in time, at a particular place, under particular circumstances. What if it's really the mixed bag of Peter's life that is the rock on which Jesus build his church? And what if the

mixed bag of Peter's life is the ring on which Jesus hangs the keys of the kingdom?

Have you ever thought of yourself as the rock on which Jesus builds his church? Have you ever considered that maybe Jesus is giving you the keys of the kingdom? Why not? I'll bet your life and my life are as much a mixed bag as is Peter's. So let's open the bag of Peter's life and see what we find.

Peter correctly answered Jesus' question and Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah!" So what are we to make of the rock and the keeper of the keys when just four verses later he rebukes Jesus and Jesus says to him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. (Matthew 16:23) Which is it? Is Peter blessed or Satan? Is he the foundation stone or a stumbling block? Maybe the most we can say is yes, yes he is. And maybe we are too.

Peter had enough faith to walk on water and enough fear to sink like a rock. (Matthew 14:28-33) Who among us today doesn't know what it like to live in the tension between faith and fear?

Sometimes Peter gets it when nobody else does. When many of Jesus' disciples were turning back he asked, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answered him, "Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69) Other times he didn't get it. "Explain this parable to us," he says. And Jesus answered him, "Are you still without understanding?" (Matthew 15:10-17)

You know what that's like, right? I do. Sometimes I don't know how I know I just know that I know or as one of our parishioners likes to say, "I just know it in my knower." And others times I don't get it, I'm clueless.

Peter often lived at the extremes. He could be stubborn and convinced he knew how things should go. Sometimes old patterns and beliefs took over in him. Does any of that sound familiar in your life? It's what we see at the foot washing when Peter says, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Then Peter wanted

everything washed, not just his feet but also his hands and his head. (John 13:8-10)

On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter says, “Lord it is good for us to be here; if you wish I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But just a couple of chapters later he says to Jesus, “Look we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Maybe it’s a spectrum we all live on. We’ve had mountain top experiences and we’ve had days when we wondered if this faith journey is getting us anywhere and what difference it is making.

Peter commits himself to Jesus saying, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” Jesus then takes Peter, James, and John to pray with him in Gethsemane. He’s grieved and agitated. He wants their presence and prayers but Mr. “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” and the others promptly fall asleep. Not once, not twice, but three times – a rather ominous number. Peter will in fact deny Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three times. It’s only when the cock crows that Peter wakes up.

Showing up and being present for another, ourselves, and life is some of our most difficult work. It’s so easy to sleepwalk through life.

When they came to arrest Jesus Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave. (Matthew 26:51) What happened to “blessed are the peacemakers,” “love your enemies,” “turn the other cheek”? Our swords often contradict Jesus’ gospel of peace and nonviolence.

So there’s the rock on which the church is built. There’s the ring on which the keys of the kingdom hang. What do you think?

Here’s the thing that strikes me. Jesus never goes to Peter and says, “Peter, give me back the keys.” And he never says that to you or me. And never goes to Peter and says, “Peter, I think I’m going to go find another rock. You’re not the one.” And he never says that to you or me. Peter is the one. So are you. So am I. We are the ones. We are the ones on whom the church is built. We are the ones entrusted with the keys of the kingdom.

And it must mean that there is something about the mixed bags of our lives that the world needs. Jesus sees something in the mixed bag of your life and my life that has value and purpose, even when we don't or can't see it. He trusts it more than we do.

I wonder what you see when you look in the mixed bag of your life. When I look in mine I see faithfulness and commitment, contradictions and inconsistencies, progress and backing up, times when I rose to the occasion and times when I ran away. My guess is that your bag holds similar things. That's what we saw in Peter's bag.

So what do we do with the mixed bags of our lives? Jesus says to do three things with them. "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep." That's what he told Peter too. Three times he asks us. I don't think he asks us to do that in spite of the mixed bag of our life. He asks us knowing that the only way we can do those things, the only way they have meaning and efficacy, is if we do them with and through the mixed bag of our life.

What does that mean and look like for you today? Tomorrow? Next week, next month? Feeding lambs, tending sheep, feeding sheep from the mixed bag of your life. Look deep in the mixed bag of your life. You and I have something to offer. We are the ones. Amen