

Luke 5:1-11

Being in a public speaking profession, I work with a lot with words. I have books of words on my desk. One friend called me a sesquipedalian. That's not a bad word! It means, "a user of big words."

I've noticed, perhaps you probably have too, how each profession has its own jargon, specialized words and phrases.

Computer people talk about "downloading" or "surfing the net;"

doctors "write scripts;"

students "ace exams;"

and accountants focus on the "bottom line."

It goes on and on. One jargon phrase that applies to a variety of professions is "The Peter Principle."

The Peter Principle was a book written some years ago by Laurence Peter. The theory states **people are promoted to the level of their incompetence**. In time every job will be occupied by someone incompetent to do the job. Now, there's a scary thought! It was a popular thesis, especially among junior executives, who are always ready to believe those above them in the organization are of meager talent.

Peter wrote another book entitled, Why Things Go Wrong, in which he provided examples of the "Peter Principle." My favorites are the ones involving public laws.

For instance in Danville, PA there is a law that says, "All fire hydrants must be checked one hour before a fire."

In Seattle the law says, "It's unlawful to carry a concealed weapon more than six feet in length."

His thesis here is **incompetence is still in full flower!** I think the books are supposed to be satire, but regardless, they make us laugh - and perhaps wonder.

What these theories tell us is there is an innate imperfection in human nature. We can't get rid of it. No matter how high we climb in life, we take our human nature with us. We have the ability to learn from our mistakes, that's true, but we don't have the ability to avoid making new ones.

One thing I like about the Bible is its realism about our humanity. The Bible is populated with people who must live with their past mistakes and incompetence. In the Old Testament Isaiah is confronted by a vision of God and cries out, "I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." That's not morbid self-deprecation. That's honesty about the human condition. When **WE** stand before God, we must confess with Isaiah, "I am unworthy."

The Bible is full of real people like Isaiah, such as Abraham, David, and Paul. These are people disarmingly honest about their humanness. My favorite is Peter, whose portrait is drawn fully and honestly in the New Testament. If anyone was an example of the "Peter Principle" it was Simon Peter. He rose quickly in the Church organization, became the CEO, or chief apostle, and took his incompetence with him all the way to the top.

Jesus himself said to Simon, "You are Peter, Petros, the rock, and on you I will build the Church." Peter had authority and early Christians probably expected a lot from him. They went to hear Peter tell stories about Jesus and the disciples.

People asked Peter, "Tell us about the first time you saw Jesus." He told them this story from Luke we read today. "I was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. We had terrible luck. We rowed back to the shore skunked. As we were washing our nets, I saw Jesus coming toward us, surrounded by a big crowd. He got into my boat and said, 'Pull out from the shore.' When he finished preaching to the crowd, he turned to me and said, 'Put out into the deep and I'll show you where the fish are.' I thought I knew it all. I knew there were no fish there, but we put down our nets and, amazingly, we couldn't pull in all the fish. He had a power I couldn't explain."

Now I want you to notice something about Peter here. Peter didn't want to responsibility for another failure so he says to Jesus, "Because you say so, I will let down the nets." Peter want to be absolved of any problems with this venture. He's had enough already so Jesus is to blame for no more fish.

"I fell to my knees and said, 'Master, leave me, I'm too imperfect to be around your holiness.' I felt like Isaiah in the Temple: unworthy in God's Presence. But do you know what Jesus did? The same thing God did to Isaiah. Jesus called me to a great mission. He said he wanted to use me, even me. To this day, I don't know why he did it. I was unworthy then and I still am. But when we got back to the shore, I left my nets and journeyed with him." Like the choir sang, Peter responded to Jesus' call to "go deeper."

Peter also told about miracles of healing, feeding thousands, and Pentecost.

But surprisingly, he also included stories of when he was a bumbling, sinful, human being, just like all of us:

like when he tried to walk on water and sank like a rock;

about when Jesus predicted he'd be arrested and crucified and Peter confidently told him, "I'll stay with you till the end." But he didn't.

Peter confessed honestly, "Three times I was asked if I was a follower of Jesus and three times I said, 'No.' I wanted to do the right thing, but I couldn't do it." Peter knew it was easy to preach a good sermon on faith. He also knew how hard faith was when it came to practicing it.

It's amazing we have these stories of Peter. The temptation certainly must have been to rewrite them, to edit out those embarrassing incidents in his life, the way other biographers do. But the New Testament writers didn't do that.

Why did Peter tell these stories about his incompetence and why did the Church remember them and write them down? Because they said, "Everybody should hear this so we'll know the Good News is not about what we can do, but about what God can do with us. It's not about our perfection, our power, or our virtue. It's about God's grace."

They realized God used Peter,

not because he did it all right, but because God made it right;

not because he was without sin, but because he could confess his sin.

Peter's power wasn't in his perfection, but in his humility. Those insights gave them hope and they can do the same for us today.

The "Peter Principle" is: *incompetence*.

The "Saint Peter Principle" is: *incompetence, honestly acknowledged, is empowered by God's grace.*

Peter's story is our story. I know it's mine. I learned long ago I can't live up to the expectations placed on me in the profession I've chosen. I've had good experiences, but I often feel unworthy and ill equipped. I've tried to be the "perfect" minister, but I've had days when nothing went right. Like Peter, I'd come home at the end of the day with nothing in the net, skunked, and felt totally incompetent and discouraged. I knew I had let somebody down, at least myself. The temptation is to give up or worse, to get defensive. I've done both.

Have you struggled with expectations, too?

There are the expectations others place on us.

There are those expectations we place on ourselves.

There are those expectations we place on the people around us. Some of those expectations are reasonable:

In marriage, we expect a spouse to be faithful and supportive;

At work, we expect an employee to have certain skills and be reliable;

In companionship, we expect close friends to be trustworthy.

When those basic expectations aren't met, a crisis evolves.

But the problem we most often face in our relationships is dealing with the unspoken or unrealistic expectations. They usually revolve around being or doing "better" to be considered competent and acceptable.

It reminds me of the story of the new pastor who wasn't like the former pastor. He didn't want to do the repairs and mowing around the church and parsonage, so he hired someone to do those chores. The additional cost concerned the church elders. One of them approached the new pastor and said, "Our previous pastor mowed the lawn and made repairs. Have you considered this?" The new pastor responded, "Yes, and I asked him, but he doesn't want to do it anymore!"

People always want us to be or do more. The reality is in order to be competent in everyone's eyes we have to fulfill everyone's expectations. We know that's impossible, but we want so much to "look" good to everyone. Think about it, if we trip and fall on the sidewalk, what's our first thought? Did anyone see us?!

Working to please everyone will leave us perpetually discouraged.

Working to mold others to please ourselves will leave us increasingly critical and controlling. A wit once said "If people constantly don't measure up to your standards, perhaps you should check your yardstick." Not bad advice.

I think we can identify with Peter because he demonstrates that sincerity and high inner expectations don't always result in success.

He demonstrates how we can be responsible and work hard, but still not meet everyone's expectations to do it "right" all the time.

He demonstrates how trying to fulfill any responsibility with human power only is laughable.

But he also demonstrates that God's grace and power can still accomplish good things through us and then God gets the praise, not us.

He demonstrates that we can be a disciple of Jesus and not be afraid Jesus will be angry with us when we fail or make a mistake. As for me, I am learning to trust God can take the words and actions of this loud, stumbling preacher and somehow use them to do something for someone else by grace. God's grace fits

each of us individually. That's the "St. Peter Principle." Our limitations and our sins are overcome by grace.

We can't always change others' expectations, but we don't have to be enslaved by them.

We can't do everything.

We certainly can't do everything well, but we can be faithful at doing our best with what God has given us to do. That means that somehow, grace is enough.

"Grace ... is ... enough." Say it with me, "**Grace is enough.**"

Dame Edith Sitwell said of William Blake, the painter and poet, "Of course he's a little cracked. That's where the light shines through." All of us are a little cracked somewhere. None of us is perfect. It's by grace those flaws don't ruin our lives. It's by grace those flaws become our source of power.

When Peter confronted Jesus and said, "I am unworthy," Jesus said to Peter, "NOW I can use you. Follow me."

When Paul asked for healing of some unknown disability God said, "My grace is enough for you because my power is made perfect in your weakness. Keep following me."

Apparently, to experience God's strength and power as a disciple, we must first recognize and accept our weakness.

I'm a long way from understanding all of this, but I know it begins when we commit our lives to Christ and accept his forgiveness for our sins.

It becomes a reality when we invite the Holy Spirit to live and work through us on a daily basis.

We are reminded of all this each time we share in worship. Worship, including baptism and Communion, isn't about how good we are and what we did; it's about how good God is and what God did for us in Jesus. That's what will get us through this life successfully.

Then, someday we "saints" will march into the Kingdom, but we'll be a motley crew of disciples. Not one of us will have been perfect. We'll have stories to tell of incompetence and success, mistakes and miracles, limitations and growth, sins and forgiveness, just like Isaiah and Peter did.

But then, also like them, we'll tell about the "God Principle" -- how God used us and blessed us anyway! And when we try to explain it we'll have to use one of those Christian jargon words we've grown to appreciate: **GRACE.**

And we'll have to admit ... grace truly is... amazing!