Prayer: As we seek to draw closer to you, O God, and as we open your word, teach us what we need to know and show us what we need to do to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The theory was developed by Lawrence Peter and its principle is this: In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence. The Peter Principle is supposed to explain occupational incompetence and I wonder if it were applied to the disciples, how they’d fare.

One of the things that has always made the Bible and the Gospels so compelling to me, is the humanness of Christianity’s first converts and adherents. They were not superheroes of faith and virtue. They were not among the most educated and enlightened—they were not scholars or very sophisticated even in that ancient culture. And the Bible is actually told in a way that exposes them in all their human weakness, with all their faults glaring.

Scholars are quick to point out that the flaws in the disciples merely serve as a stark contrast to Jesus and therefore help us see him in the proper light. In fact, some claim that Peter exemplifies this in that he’s always impetuous, usually misguided and often speaking when he should be listening. And yet curiously, it is Peter whom Jesus calls a rock and upon whom he would build his church. So let’s think about that for a moment.

The text is a familiar one. This exchange between Jesus and Peter also appears elsewhere and therefore it comes up frequently in the lectionary cycle. As I thought about it, I’ve probably preached more sermons on this particular exchange than anything else in scripture. The reason, I think, in addition to its frequency in the lectionary, is that its message—its challenge—goes right to the core of what Christianity is all about.

Assumptions were swirling as to who Jesus was. And so one day as they were entering the villages in and around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus invited the disciples to reflect on who he is by asking them, “Who do people say that I am?” John the Baptist or Elijah, perhaps another one of the prophets, they offer. But then Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am?”

It’s a loaded question deserving of a sober answer. Get it wrong and nothing could be more tragic. Get it right and your life can never be the same. And when Peter answers correctly, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus right away instructs them not to tell anyone. Maybe it’s like the way economists sound these days while attempting to make sense of the economy? You get the feeling they’re giving the correct responses without fully understanding their own answers. So Peter answers correctly but does he really
comprehend the ramifications of his own answer? And perhaps sensing that about Peter and therefore about all of the disciples, Jesus senses a teaching moment here.

He teaches them that the Son of Man will be rejected and that he will suffer and die, and apparently that’s where Peter stopped listening, because it’s as if he didn’t hear Jesus explain further that he wouldn’t stay dead, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. We can imagine how that went, “No, this must never happen to you…it can’t happen to you Jesus…the Messiah can’t die.” And Jesus issues a rebuke right back and one that is designed to get their attention, “Get behind me Satan, you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

In other words, “That’s a devil of an idea, Peter, for the Messiah not to die—for the cost of discipleship to be so low.” But that’s where Peter’s humanity is glaring. He answered correctly. He knew what was right. He had good intensions and his heart was in the right place. And yet he stumbles time and time again.

In a book entitled simply, Saint Peter, historian Michael Grant devotes an entire chapter to Peter’s weaknesses. Throughout the gospel narratives Peter shows an incredible lack of comprehension as to who Jesus was and what he was all about. And while none of the disciples come across as exemplary faith models, Grant argues that Peter is portrayed in a particularly unfavorable light.

Peter is censured by Paul as having misunderstood who Jesus was and what he was trying to accomplish. In moments of confusion and fear, Peter speaks without really understanding what he’s saying. Peter’s attempt to walk on water failed because he had insufficient faith. When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, like the others, fell asleep. And when Jesus returns and finds them sleeping, Jesus seems to single out Peter, “Couldn’t you stay awake even for an hour?” Almost like Jesus somehow expected more from him.

Peter was so impulsive. On that fateful night when Jesus crawled around the room on his hands and knees, washing the feet of the disciples, it was Peter who initially refused Jesus’ gesture. And when Jesus explained what he was doing, Peter blurts out as if he’s still missing the point, “Ok then, but not only my feet, but also my head and my hands.”

And when soldiers came and arrested Jesus it was Peter who completely lost control, wielding a sword and slicing the ear off one of the soldiers and forcing Jesus to not only heal the man’s ear but to tell Peter to behave himself. And then, of course, there are the denials. Three of them, and described by the gospel narratives with such eloquence and heart-breaking reality, that how could you not feel sorry for the guy. After promising that he’d do nothing less than lay down his life for Jesus, he ends up denying that he ever knew him.

Peter shows us humanity at its weakest and Christianity as it is sadly, most often lived out. He demonstrates strong desires and good intentions but also the embarrassing reality
of our weak-kneed convictions when it comes to keeping the faith and making good on our promises. In many ways, he’s just like us.

But wouldn’t Peter have made a terrible Presbyterian? He acts and speaks by way of instinct and emotion, and committees don’t generally function well like that. But hard structures and tight systems don’t always allow for the freedom and movement of the Spirit. I’m not saying that the Spirit doesn’t move through our structures and systems, I just wonder sometimes if our systems are designed to control the Spirit and keep things from getting out of hand? Because if the Spirit starts moving, who knows where it will take you? And spontaneity sometimes makes us nervous. Shows of emotion make us uncomfortable and we blush when people in our midst lose control.

So why then did Jesus choose Peter as a disciple in the first place? And more importantly, the one on whom he would build his church? What qualities was Jesus looking for that he apparently found in Peter? Again, Michael Grant in his book on Peter offers this,

Peter was, in the last resort, as loyal and faithful to Jesus as human nature permitted him to be. In Jesus, and in his message and mission, Peter’s belief was unqualified and unlimited. That is why Jesus chose him and set him apart. And that is why Peter, next to his leader, was perhaps the greatest Christian of all time (p. 71).

Do you suppose that despite his flaws, Jesus was looking for someone just like Peter—is looking for people who listen to their hearts? Who aren’t afraid of their own emotions? Who are passionate about the things he was passionate about? People who are downright uninhibited and unafraid?

Because if left merely to the rationale of our human ways of thinking and being, we’d always look for an out. We seem to be most comfortable when we are in control, when we’re organizing and ordering, qualifying and categorizing, being efficient and expedient. But there is a huge difference between showing emotion and being emotional.

And I would argue that the cross which Jesus requires us to pick up, demands that we see things differently. Maybe the Peter Principle we need to adhere to isn’t to rise to our own level of incompetence, but to rise to the highest level of thinking and operating in ways that are radically different from the ways much of the world thinks and behaves. Because worldly thinking would seek to avoid a cross at all cost.

I think Jesus’ rebuke of Peter is strong because unlike the scene in the wilderness where Jesus is tempted by Satan, Peter’s rebuking Jesus for all his talk about suffering and death and arguing that it shouldn’t happen sounded tempting as hell to Jesus—the notion of avoiding pain and suffering—that you can have power without pain or glory without humiliation.
The proposition that there is another way to Easter other than going through Good Friday makes good sense from a marketing standpoint. It’s the kind of thing that, given enough time and cups of coffee, a church committee could actually develop a nice, comfortable, non-threatening route for people to follow. And many people are looking for a religion that will help protect them from conflict and provide them with a strict set of values for successful, happy living. Positive Thinkers see the cross as an obstacle to overcome, not as a necessary piece of the divine plan leading to resurrection (see *Texts for Preaching – Year B*, pp. 512-513).

One of the most formative books I read in seminary was John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*. Here’s what Yoder has to say about Jesus and the cross.

Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications; he was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry unfortunately was seen in a political light; he was not a sacrificial lamb preparing for his own [destruction], or a God-man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. Jesus was…the bearer of a new possibility of human, social and therefore political relationships. His baptism is the inauguration and his cross is the culmination of that new regime in which disciples are called to share. [We cannot] avoid his call to an ethic marked by the cross, a cross identified as the punishment of a man who threatens society by creating a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life (pp. 62-63).

And that’s what you’ll discover in the cross if you dare to see it and dare to pick it up. You’ll discover one who loved his enemies, whose righteousness is greater than the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gave his robe to those who took his cloak, and the one who prayed for those who mocked him.

By inviting us to pick up a cross, Jesus is inviting us into a radically new kind of life. He’s inviting us to shed our tendency to live cautious, calculating, risk-avoiding, self-centered lives, and to discover instead the profound truth that in losing our lives we find them.

Amen.