

**“Barney Fife, Peter, and Us”**  
**Mark 8:27–38**  
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Some biblical characters are so familiar to us that we may have a difficult time seeing them as they truly are. We form an image of them that is so precise and inflexible that we ignore any new information that doesn't fit our image. Peter is one of these characters. He is the tough fisherman with a beard who leaves everything to follow Jesus, a bold leader who speaks up for Christ... or is he?

He denies knowing Jesus three times when Jesus is arrested. He mouths off on the Mount of Transfiguration, something about building three dwelling places for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, but they don't stay on the mountain. And in today's reading from Mark, he proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah but then dresses Jesus down for talking about suffering and death. How does any of this fit the traditional image?

A times, it can be helpful to view a biblical character through the lens of some fictional character in literature, film, or television, to make room for a different aspect of who they are. We might view Peter as one of the Marx Brothers who constantly stumble over each other. Or we could view him as Gollum in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, though perhaps Judas would be a more precise match for him, since he ends up helping to save humanity without meaning to do so and loses his life in the process. But most of all, I think Peter resembles Barney Fife.

This is not an original observation, and I realize some of you may not know who Barney is. I won't ask for a show of hands, but if you live in this state and don't know, you have a moral obligation to find out! He is a character on the old *Andy Griffith Show*, an awkward deputy who is constantly speaking up when he doesn't know what he is talking about, offering to solve problems he doesn't understand, well intentioned and sincere but overzealous and inept.

Sound familiar? Barney may not have a beard, and his toughness is all bravado, but he is a lot like Peter, or Peter is a lot like him.

We see this clearly in today's reading from Mark. Jesus and the disciples are at Caesaria Philippi, modern day Baniyas, a site with altars to many ancient gods. It is the perfect location for Jesus to talk about his identity. So, he asks his disciples who others say he is. They reply, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Then, he asks, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter speaks up boldly, saying, "You are the Messiah," at which point, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about him, which seems odd but isn't...

Jesus then teaches them that he must suffer and die and be raised again after three days, and Barney — Peter, that is — takes him aside and rebukes him! We can't blame him for not thinking that the Messiah will suffer and die because no one thinks this. The prophet Isaiah describes a suffering servant in several passages, including today's reading, but the concept of suffering servant is not associated with the Messiah until after Jesus' death and resurrection.

So, we can't blame Peter for misunderstanding, everyone does. It's why Jesus orders his disciples not to tell others he is the Messiah. They will misunderstand. But we can blame Peter for talking down to Jesus. He seems to have forgotten that Jesus is the sheriff, and he is the deputy! The Syrophenician woman in last week's reading talks back to Jesus, but while speaking up for her daughter, and with a level of respect. Peter talks to Jesus like he doesn't have a clue about what he is doing, and yet Peter has just said, "You are the Messiah." Well intentioned and sincere but overzealous and inept — Barney Fife!

Like Sheriff Andy Taylor talking to Barney, Jesus has to set Peter straight. This may be the first "come-to-Jesus meeting" on record. Jesus rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Then, he gathers all his disciples and the crowd nearby and doubles down on his teaching about a suffering Messiah. Not only will he suffer, but those who want to be his followers will deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Andy has spoken, and Barney doesn't quite know what to do, nor does anyone else at this point. Only on the other side of the cross and empty tomb will this make sense.

So, what is the message for us in all of this? Well, we not only see another side of Peter; we see a part of ourselves. We are a lot like Peter and Barney, at least many of us are. Some of us play a quieter role in life, starting in school as young children, never raising our hand to answer a question but rather processing thoroughly or waiting for someone else to speak too soon and make a fool of themselves. I won't ask for a show of hands on this because you are not hand raisers. But many of us speak early and often whether we know what we are talking about or not. We may be external processors and that is fine, but what is not fine is adamantly holding on to our convictions when we are wrong.

There is too much of this in today's world, ignorance combined with arrogance, and a great deal of it is attached to religion, people who speak boldly about things they do not understand, following in the footsteps of Peter dressing down Jesus for talking about suffering.

I think of a character in the play "East of Nineveh." He is a zealous young radio e-vangelist who thinks he knows it all, but the roots of his faith aren't very deep. On one broadcast, he tells his audience that the Lord has given him a special insight into scripture. Many people have wondered what the sea-pulture is in Mark 15:46 (KJV), he says, but God has revealed to him that the sea-pulture is a great white bird that hovers over Jesus after his death, offering protection.

He is pumped with self-righteousness until a wise older man trying to hold on to his faith confronts him. He doesn't know whether to be amused or enraged, but the word, he says, is sepulchre, not sea-pulture; it refers to a burial site, not a bird!

I also think of real-life people who act like Peter or Barney Fife - almost everyone who claims to have an insight on prophecy about the end of the world, they have been wrong for 2,000 years; almost everyone who claims to have the key to the book of Revelation, which inevitably involves identifying contemporary people as those the author is talking about, when he is speaking in coded terms about people in his own time; and the majority of Christian zealots who try to inform others about the evils of Islam, our own Charles Kimball's book *Truth Over Fear: Combating The Lies About Islam* confronts this distortion quite decisively.

Sometimes it is difficult to know when we are wrong. We have been taught certain things that may not be true, and in today's world of misinformation and mass distortion, the risks are even higher. At the very least, we can tone down our rhetoric, remain open to new ideas and information, and practice a little humility. A theology professor began every lecture with the statement, "About this I may be wrong." Whether we say this out loud or not, the spirit behind these words is helpful.

But Peter isn't just wrong about suffering, he loses sight of who Jesus is. He forgets that Jesus is the sheriff, and he is just the deputy. In like manner, we can at times lose sight of who Jesus is and thus of our appropriate place as well. There is only one head of the church and that is no minister, deacon, bishop, or pope. Christ is head of the church, and we are all members of the body.

This may seem obvious, but it is not always how churches function. There are often tensions and outright conflicts about who is in charge, who will run things, who will make key decisions. And the various parties involved may claim to be trying to discern and follow Christ's intent, not just pursuing their own agenda. Sometimes people who genuinely want to place Christ's will first disagree on how they understand this will. But often when conflict intensifies, self-interest supersedes Christ's will.

Years ago, a member of the church I served in Louisville, Kentucky was asked to moderate a conference at a church where the conflict had grown out of control. He was a judge who had moderating skills, and so when he walked into the packed room and two men approached him, he knew what to do. The first was the pastor, the leader of one faction, who said he wanted to have the opening prayer. The second was the deacon chair, the leader of the other faction, who said he wanted to have the opening prayer. Realizing neither man was going to talk to God, the judge said, "Fellas, there won't be any prayer today!"

How does church conflict get to that point? There are always many reasons, but losing sight of Who is in charge is in the mix. It is not us; we are just deputies. And yet, this dynamic comes into play not just in conflict, but in other ways as well.

Whether in our faith journey or the shared life of the church, we can get excited about a possibility and go a long way toward pursuing it before engaging in a serious process of discernment of divine intent. There is no magical method of discernment, and God can be at work in our excitement, but it is critical that we seek clarity before we go too far.

Peter doesn't want to have anything to do with suffering. Nor do we. But it lies at the very heart of Christian discipleship, giving up self-interest, laying down life for others. Whatever we discern for our future, if no self-giving is involved, we may want to push the pause button.

Like Peter and Barney, we may speak up when we don't know what we are talking about, and we can lose sight of Who is in charge of our lives, but there is one other thing we need to take away from this story. Despite Peter's shortcomings, outbursts and stumbling, Jesus does not give up on him. As Sheriff Taylor keeps Barney Fife as his deputy, honoring the good intentions of his heart that lie beneath his foolishness, Jesus builds his church on Peter and people like him. The implication is that the God who was in Christ can make a church out of people like us.

We need not beat ourselves down. This church has many gifts — a genuinely welcoming character, an openness to new ideas and people, a willingness to ask questions and express doubts while demonstrating sincere faith and deep conviction, a yearning to love people in practical ways. But we are human. James says we all make many mistakes. Yet it is with people like us that God shapes the beloved community.

Consider the people Jesus spends time with — Zacchaeus whom Frederick Buechner says climbs a sycamore tree a crook and comes down a saint, the woman at the well whose marital struggles might not be her fault but who carries the weight of others' judgment until Jesus comes along, a long list of marginalized people. Consider Jesus' choice of disciples — an odd collection of tax collectors and fishermen, James and John who want special treatment, Peter who denies Jesus, Judas who betrays him. And there is Paul who persecutes Christians until he becomes one and helps build the church. God chooses what is foolish to shame the wise, he says, but God also sees the good in every one of us. If God can see good in Peter and use him, God can do the same with us.