The Peter Principle
By Kent Organ
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Matthew 14:22-33

Ever since Laurence J. Peter put into words that ingenious bit of wisdom that bears his name, I’ve been intrigued to see how many examples of its truth there are. Dr. Peter wrote a tongue-in-cheek study of American society based on his discovery that climbing the ladder of success means achieving a series of promotions which finally qualifies you for a position for which you are totally unqualified. Or, in his words,

*In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence and remain there.*

The corollary is, “In time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties.” That’s the Peter Principle.

If this is unfamiliar to you, let me elaborate: If I do my work really well, I’m likely to be promoted to a new and better job, and then to another and another, until, finally, I reach a position where I don’t do well. And there I’ll stay. No more promotions. I, who had always done so well, will remain in precisely the position where I am incompetent.

We all have some experience with the Peter Principle. We have seen good sales people become mediocre managers. Skilled mechanics become poor supervisors. Outstanding classroom teachers become less than stellar principals.

Dr. Peter says that this is why, eventually, things always go wrong. Although, the one redeeming feature in the system is that the real work gets carried out by those who haven’t yet reached their level of incompetence!

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Now, if we do a little modifying, a little reshaping, the Peter Principle could become an axiom for Christian discipleship:

*Within the body of Christ, every disciple is called to rise to his or her level of failure or incompetence.*

This principle should be attributed to another Peter, Simon Peter. Because St. Peter seemed to demonstrate it time and time again. Certainly, he had no business trying to walk on water!

Let’s take a look at the Matthew narrative. Something important for you to know is that Matthew wrote his Gospel as a kind of manual for the early church. So his story about the disciples in a boat during a storm with Jesus coming to them, rescuing them, is not only a miracle story showing Jesus’ command over the elements. It is also a parable for the church. Recall that the boat was an ancient symbol of the Christian church. This story is a parable for that vulnerable first-century community of the faithful, buffeted by winds and waves in a hostile environment.
And the miracle, for them, resides in the promise that Christ will be present in their storms, coming to save them. This story offered hope to anxious people in need of hope.

Then we look at Peter. Peter has a special place in the gospels. He is regularly portrayed as the representative disciple. He is the one in whom we recognize ourselves, the one who reminds us of our own ups and downs, our faithfulness and unfaithfulness as followers of Jesus.

Although in this story of Peter he is not like us at all. We would stay in the boat. We would do the sensible thing, hang on for dear life. But not Peter. Impulsive, daring Peter “promotes himself” to the level of his incompetence. He steps out of the boat in an effort to reach his Master. Imagine, a fisherman trying to walk on water! And soon he is over his head, sinking like a dead weight, and crying out for help. A pathetic figure, victim of his own recklessness.

Jesus comes to the rescue, and chides him for his lack of faith. Meanwhile, you and I are back in the boat, chuckling a bit nervously at the whole scene. It may not be until the next morning, when the panic of the moment is past, that we realize the irony that bold Peter was the one who was chastised for lack of faith, while we hadn’t even considered climbing overboard, when going overboard, I expect, is what real discipleship is all about.

This is a parable. It is about security and insecurity, risk, and faith, and the power of God. The St. Peter Principle: Every disciple called to our level of incompetence and failure; every disciple summoned to dare more than we alone have adequate resources for, in order to discover the fundamental source of our strength. In the body of Christ, nothing succeeds like failure – the discovery that you have gone overboard in some great undertaking for Christ’s sake, and now, up to your ears, you have to trust God’s power to rescue you.

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The trouble is, like everyone else, we resist the discovery of our own incompetence. We hide our inadequacies. We remain carefully within the limits of our proven abilities and skills. “Don’t take on too much.” “Don’t venture too much.” “Conserve your energy.” So that when the storms come, and they will come, “We can run our ship quite nicely by ourselves, thank you.”

Congregations in the Presbyterian and United Church of Christ traditions have learned very well how to be prudent: calculating our goals, planning our agendas, developing careful budgets, monitoring them. Our Finance Committee has been doing that carefully for months, and have concerns – which have been brought to your attention. We do what we can to prevent failure. We safeguard ourselves. So that, hopefully, we will seldom run the risk of needing any help from God to save us. We would rather not be vulnerable in Christ’s service.

Now, prudence is a virtue. It makes sense to stay in a boat during a storm. It makes sense to count the cost, to protect your resources, to balance the budget, to prepare carefully for the future.

Prudence is a virtue. But, for Christians, there is always a higher value. Its Bible name is agape. We translate it, inadequately, as “love.” But its meaning is the total opposite of prudence. A gapé entails going into deep water, often without a paddle or even the ability to swim, because Christ beckons. What does it look like? Maybe like Bud Hayes, Lois Thiessen Love, Sandy Jefferson and others standing in front of the church witnessing to peace. Or a Prevail volunteer meeting with someone who, in this increasingly Darwinian economy, is struggling toward self-sufficiency. Or a couple I know who will soon become foster parents for a Central American refugee child.
Edward Everett Hale said it this way: “I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.” And Jesus put it like this: “Whoever would save their life must lose it.” “If you would be first, you must be the servant of all,” and then, definitively, “Take up your cross.”

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Four years ago, this congregation fashioned a vision, called “2020.” It is reminiscent of the St. Peter Principle. It reminds me also of Reinhold Niebuhr’s take on Christian ethics. Niebuhr commented on attempts to accomplish agape love within the social order; he called this “the impossible possibility.” Christ-like love, he said, is “not realizable in any historical situation.” Niebuhr wrote that in a chapter in his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* which, ironically, he titled “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal.” He advised, “Hold that impossible ideal before you. The model of Christ keeps us humble – challenges our illusions, and our innocence – but it also stirs us not to be satisfied with puny approximations of the ideal.

Four years ago, you put three aspirational principles before yourselves. And they are back, as you have noticed. Take a look. They are at the top of the inside back page of the bulletin.

These principles are back because, in “holy conversations,” the Transition Team and Council heard you say, “We do aspire to this. Let’s keep it in front of us; let’s keep challenging ourselves”...

- *To move from words to witness in our relationship with God;*
- *To move from individualism to intimate fellowship in our relationship with other members of the church community; and*
- *To move from charity to changing structures in our relationship with the world.*

This is just an outline. But it signals a desire to get out of our prudential zone. And it signals our awareness of the distance we have to go to get where we want to be.

Will these words be more than words? Will we demonstrate them? The Vision 2020 bullet points challenge us to rise to the level of our incompetence. And the world waits, awaits evidence that Jesus Christ can make a difference in the way we live, awaits reason to believe again in the power of agape love.

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We need to test the St. Peter Principle. Because, in the paradox of God’s grace, it may only be when we risk going overboard in faithfulness to Christ’s service that we will ever know the full resources of God’s presence and power.

As we move toward that future which the Spirit is preparing for us – and preparing us for – may we trust God’s competence to overcome our weakness and our doubt, so that we might fulfill the promise that we are.

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