

One of my favorite things to do on the weekends, especially during hot summer nights, is to kick back, relax, and watch a movie. And lately, I have been finding myself rewatching some of my favorite films from the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. One of them, which can be watched on Disney plus, features a very inspiring story filled with moving speeches and encouraging quotes. For example, "Great moments are born from great opportunity!"

Perhaps, you may recall the actor Kurt Russell saying those words in the movie *Miracle*, which tells the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team's victory over the seemingly invincible Russians. "And that's what you have here, tonight, boys," he tells his team. Great opportunity. "That's what you've earned here tonight. One game. If we played 'em 10 times, they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight. Tonight, we skate with them. Tonight, we stay with them. And we shut them down because we can! Tonight, *we* are the greatest hockey team in the world."

Spoiler Alert, they go on to win! After hearing one of the greatest speeches ever given! And as we think about the rousing speech Russel gives as coach Brooks in the film, perhaps we might consider the opportunities Jesus created for his disciples to be stimulated and motivated in their faith. In fact, in our Gospel story this morning, you could say the Lord creates an opportunity for his followers in the district of Caesarea Philippi, where King Herod had built a temple to Caesar Augustus. Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Interestingly enough, the disciples respond to his question with very positive and flattering answers. "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Apparently, the word on the street regarding Jesus -- the Son of Man -- is that he is believed to be John, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. "But who do *you* say that I am?" says Jesus, making the question more personal and intimate.

Simon Peter offers up a now famous Biblical quote that has become an essential statement of faith for all who would call themselves Christians. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" It's a great moment! Born from a great opportunity. Peter makes a declaration about Jesus that changes the course of his life and the history of the entire Christian community. And it begins with a few heartfelt words, spoken at precisely the right moment.

It was a great speech! Okay, maybe it wasn't a "speech" in a technical sense of the word. More like it was one of the "greatest *comments* ever made." "The greatest *answer* ever given."

It was great. Maybe one of the greatest moments ever that set Peter apart from the other disciples who were called to follow Christ.

Ok, then, so what makes Peter's statement so powerful? The greatest of speeches (comments, answers, retorts) are given -- and what follows is a great sermon, or homily, given by the right person, at the right moment, with the right vision and the right understanding. All of this is true for Peter when he makes his declaration about Jesus. And it can be true for us as well.

For starters, Peter is the **right person**. He's not an extraordinary person -- he has the same strengths and weaknesses as the other disciples. He will protest forcefully when Jesus speaks of his suffering and death, and will stumble badly when he denies Jesus on the night before the crucifixion. But because Peter's so very human, so much like any one of us, he's the right person to make a declaration about Jesus!

Another thing that we should consider is that Peter also speaks at the **right moment**. At this point in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is nearing the completion of his ministry in Galilee. Soon, he will head toward Jerusalem and face the suffering and death that awaits him there. But first, he needs to make sure that his disciples are clear about who he is, and what the community of his followers will look like.

So, in our story this morning, we observe that their time in Caesarea Philippi is the right moment for Peter to speak.

When he makes his statement, Peter also has the **right vision**. He senses Jesus is no mere prophet, a man like John, Elijah, Jeremiah and the others before him. No, Peter sees that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who has been anointed by God to rule. Literally, that's what the title Messiah means in Hebrew, "anointed," a title usually attached to a king. Peter considers Jesus to be his king, the one who brings the kingdom of God into the middle of human life.

And on top of all this, Peter has the **right understanding**. He grasps that Jesus is "the Son of the living God," the one who shows God's divine power and love more clearly than anyone else. In fact, in the very next chapter, Peter will hear God's voice boom out of a cloud, confirming the accuracy of his understanding, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity without the living Jesus Christ, remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without Jesus Christ .... And a Christianity of that kind is nothing more or less than the end of discipleship. In such a religion, there is trust in God, but no following of Christ."

Years later, while in prison for his participation with fellow Christians and co-conspirators in a plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote about the need for a truly human faith capable of living in this world. "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it. I suppose I wrote *the Cost of Discipleship* as the end of that path. I eventually discovered, however and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith."

Getting back to today's narrative, we can't help but notice, Jesus' reaction to Peter's confession of faith. He is impressed. So impressed, in fact, that he says to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." In other words, Jesus sees that Peter's declaration is a pure gift of God, and he's thankful for it.

Which leads him to declare, "You are Peter and, on this rock, I will build my church." Jesus gives him a name which means "rock," saying that Peter's confession will be the rock on which the Christian church will be built. "The gates of Hades will not prevail against it," predicts Jesus. The church will be so strong that death itself will not be able to overcome it. Jesus concludes by giving Peter the "keys of the kingdom of heaven," with authority to bind and to loosen, which means that Peter now has authority to be the chief teacher in the church.

Many biblical scholars seem to understand that the keys of the kingdom are all about teaching, not about who gets into the Pearly Gates. The evidence can be found when we begin to understand that Peter is given authority to teach in the name of Jesus, and to share his grace, truth, forgiveness, and love with the world, just as the church continues to do so today. Which, brings us to our take home, a question we should all be asking ourselves as disciples of Jesus! What can we do to follow the example of Peter in being the **right people**, in the **right moments**, sharing the **right vision**, with a **right understanding**?

Coach Brooks in the movie *Miracle* says, "Great moments are born from great opportunity." Each of us has a great opportunity to play the role of Peter in the world today, since we share his strengths and weaknesses and have similar opportunities to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

We are the **right people** to say that Jesus is our Messiah. We are the spiritual doctors, so to speak, who know that Jesus is the Great Physician, the faith filled soldiers and sailors who honor Jesus as the Prince of Peace, the students and

teachers who grasp that Jesus is the Truth, the way, and the life, the leaders who see him as the King of Kings, and the astrophysicists who look up to him as the Bright Morning Star.

We speak at the **right moments**, when a child is struggling and needs a word of encouragement, when a conflict erupts and can be defused by a message of reconciliation, when a colleague is wandering and needs a word of guidance, and when a friend is dying and needs to hear that Jesus has conquered death.

And the **right vision** focuses on Jesus as our sovereign -- the one who rules our faith and life. We look up to Jesus as the one who rules over us with perfect guidance, grace and love. He is the Master we serve with our time, abilities and money; he is the Lord who gives us direction as we make decisions about relationships, our careers and family life. To say that Jesus is Messiah is to say that he is "large and in charge."

Finally, a **right understanding** grasps that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. We understand him when we "stand under" him, seeing that he's in a close and intimate relationship with our God who is alive and well and active in human life. Because Jesus is God's Son, he puts a human face on the grace and truth of our Creator. When we understand Jesus, we understand God.

Peter was given an opportunity to give a speech about Jesus, and it turned into the greatest ever. He didn't miss his moment, and neither should we! So, let's do all that we can to declare who Jesus is to us through how we live our lives in this world, each and every day we are a part of it. Thanks be to God! Amen.