

I think we sometimes have an over-glamorized view of the saints and apostles. We put them up on pedestals as statues. We flatten out their personalities and turn them into 2-dimensional stained-glass windows. We turn them into superheroes, people so holy that they seem very aloof and very different from the rest of us.

But the fact of the matter is, all the great saints of the church are real human beings. We can learn as much from their foibles and their failings as we can from their goodness and godliness. With this in mind, I want to take a look this week and next week at a number of scenes from the life of a man who is regarded as one of the greatest of saints: Simon Peter, the Apostle.

Scene 1 is from our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus and his disciples are heading north, out of Israel, into the area we call the Golan Heights. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simeon bar Jonah, or in English, Simon, son of John hits the home run. He gets the gold star. "You're the Christ, the Messiah. You're God's son. You're the one God has sent to save Israel." And after Simon says this, Jesus gives him a new name. Simon becomes Peter. But in Jesus' culture, Peter isn't really a proper name like it is today. It's more of a nickname. It means rock. Maybe a better English translation is Rocky. Instead of hearing Jesus say, "Simon, thou art Peter," we should maybe hear Jesus say, "Simon, I'm going to start calling you Rocky."

When I hear Rocky, I can't help but think of Rocky Balboa, the Sylvester Stallone movie boxer. I like to think of Peter and Rocky Balboa in much the same way. Physically strong and quick, but mentally slow and thick. Well-meaning with a good heart, but also impetuous, jumping into things without thinking them through.

In fact, there's a second part to this first scene. I'll be our Gospel lesson next Sunday. Today we hear Jesus give Peter his new name. A few verses after, Jesus has to take Peter down a peg. Peter tries to talk Jesus out of the crucifixion. He says, "God forbid it, Lord."

In other words he's saying, 'Lord, you don't need to suffer, you don't need to die. That can't be what God is expecting.'

And immediately Jesus tells Peter pretty bluntly, "Get behind me Satan. You're a stumbling block." Peter quickly goes from being the rock-solid foundation of the church to being like a big boulder out in the middle of the road. Rocky is off to a rocky start with his new nickname. He quickly becomes a road hazard.

Scene 2 is a few weeks later in Jerusalem. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples of his impending arrest. Peter jumps up and says, "Lord, I'm going to stick with you. Lord, I'm ready to go to prison with you. I'm ready to die with you." Peter seems rock solid at this point.

But just a few short hours later, Peter denies Jesus three times. Peter doesn't just deny being a follower of Jesus. He denies even knowing Jesus. At what was Peter's motivation? It was simply to save his own hide. It was pure unadulterated self-preservation and cowardice.

During Jesus' Passion, Peter's nickname should not have been Rocky. It should have been Sandy. When push comes to shove, Peter crumbles and collapses. He turns out to be as solid as shifting sands.

Scene 3 is a few weeks later. After Jesus' Resurrection, Jesus is having breakfast with a few of his disciples on the beach. After breakfast, Jesus gives Peter three opportunities to proclaim his love. Jesus asks, "Simon bar Jonah, do you love me?" These three times that Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" give Peter the opportunity to take back his 3 denials.

Peter has messed up. Peter has broken his relationship with Jesus. But that morning, Peter turns back to Jesus. "Yes Lord, you know I love you." Peter affirms three times that he indeed loves Jesus. And Jesus wipes the slate clean. And then, Jesus gives Peter a job to do: "Feed my sheep."

Scene 4 is a few weeks later. On the day of Pentecost, Acts tells us, that all the apostles receive the Holy Spirit. But then it is Peter who stands up boldly in Jerusalem and publicly proclaims, in the Christian church's first sermon, the Good News of life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the Peter who a couple months earlier had told Jesus that suffering wasn't necessary. This is the Peter who had denied even knowing Jesus.

This very same Peter is now proclaiming to all who would listen that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he had suffered, died, and been raised. With the gift of Jesus' forgiveness, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter is changed. He's beginning to live up to his nickname, Rocky. He's is now willing to risk imprisonment or even death for the sake of his Lord.

But the story of Peter doesn't end at Pentecost. If it the Bible was written by Hollywood, it probably would. This is a great happy ending.

But real life is more complex. And next week I want to talk about a few additional scenes from Peter's life.

But for now, remember Peter's strong example. Not because he was so wonderful. But because he messed up, and yet persevered. He gained ground, then lost ground, then gained ground again.

And when he did mess up, he was able to seek God's forgiveness, and begin moving in the right direction again.

Like Peter, we too will mess up in our Christian lives from time to times. But like Peter, we also have the opportunity to redeem ourselves, to put our past behind us, and to move forward into new life in Christ.

And we'll see more examples of this next week.