



Now, with all due respect to Peter and Paul, perhaps the two most influential figures in the early church of long ago, ranking only behind Jesus Christ himself, with all due respect to the absolute giants of the faith, the stories about them also seem to reveal that they had their moments of ego, pride, even a most stubborn streak. And I'm sure this will come as a

monumental shock to everyone, but pastors have such moments too with ego, pride, even a most stubborn streak.

So, it especially was for me during my first year of seminary, the pastor-training school, of sorts. The following summer was when we were supposed to find a hospital to serve as a de-facto chaplain for several weeks, to better hone our pastoral care skills and enhance our compassion, empathy, and maybe even knock us down a peg or two on the pride scale.

Part of the expectation at the hospital I ended up joining was spending time with a spiritual care advisor. And yes, my ego and pride said that wasn't necessary for me: that as I was learning to become an ordained minister, I was more than taken care of in the spiritual department. Nevertheless, on I went to my first conversation with this woman I never met before. And to this day, I still remember what she said. I forget exactly how it came up, but I brought up this no-pressure-at-all expectation that has probably been around since the days of Peter and Paul, that the clergy are expected to be the shepherds of whatever community of faith they are called to serve. And then she responded with something I never expected, something that I have clung to ever since: "I hate to break this to you, but you're not a shepherd. You never will be. And not just because you don't have sheep in a pasture out back. The church has had one shepherd since its beginning, and that's all the church needs. You don't have to be the shepherd. Jesus took care of that, and still does. You don't have to save a flock. Christ already saved them all. You're not a shepherd. You are another sheep called to nibble at the hooves of other sheep to get them to follow the one and only true shepherd. That's important to be sure, but the Lord already took care of the most important part. Jesus Christ is the shepherd, and he is all we need."

The nerve of that woman. The nerve of her to second-guess a cherished image of pastor and church life that has been passed down for centuries, never to be questioned at all. The nerve of her to insinuate that pastors are not the center of organized religion operation. The nerve of her to proclaim the truth of the Gospel itself: as if to pass along the reality that was insisted upon by a Peter and a Paul and countless saints ever since. The nerve on that woman to be right, in the end. She definitely knocked me down a peg or two, but it was still Good News, in the end.

Yes, Peter and Paul had their stubborn moments to be sure, butting heads against each other over the new church protocol, insisting with every fiber of their being that their way was the only way to pull it off. Egos the size of the entire Roman Empire at the time, pride that would frustrate the most compassionate shepherd, and yet both of them are called to lead a movement of hope and grace and new life, all the holy effects of which we still feel to this day.

And so it's only fitting that we hear the story of Peter, who not just once, not just twice, but three times flat-out denied knowing the One who was about to save the whole world; and for some reason beyond comprehension to the rest of us, Jesus goes back to the man who acted as if he didn't want anything to do with the Lord in his most vulnerable moment. Still, the

Resurrected Christ with all the grace imaginable not just once, not just twice, but three times over insists that Peter in all his ego and pride and stubborn streaks galore is still essential in helping nudge the flock along in a movement that will bless the world with all the hope it needs.

Going back to that spiritual care advisor, who insisted that, for some reason, Christ was the only shepherd the church, as well as Peter and Paul, ever needed: during our whole conversation she was knitting a scarf together for her granddaughter. It was a little distracting, at first, but it just might have been the perfect image for our conversation that day. All these different colors she was putting together, all woven and intertwined, to create something that wouldn't just be a result of however many hours of work, which I could never pull off myself, but that it was ultimately a source of comfort, of love, of selflessness. And perhaps that's what the church is still called to be: the Shepherd doing all he can to weave us together with all our various egos and imperfections, to be sure, but all our gifts and talents, and the core of our God-loving Holy Spirit beautifully dwelling within each of us; a flock for not only its own self-sustaining, but to be that source of comfort and love and selflessness to a world that isn't so sure any of it exists anymore. Peter and Paul had to face such doubts from the world long ago as well, but they saw first-hand how One insisted that it was all worth loving, it was all worth the entire Divine supply of grace and hope and new life. It was worth arriving in the flesh as the only Shepherd we would ever need to guide us along still and choppy waters all the way to a shadowed-over valley and into the pasture of never-ending joy. So, for Peter and Paul, and all the saints along the way who always pointed to the One true Shepherd in Jesus Christ, our Lord, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!