

UNDERSTANDING BOTH SIDES OF THE COIN

After weeks of hype, the Super Bowl finally starts with a coin toss to determine which team will kick off. The referee shows the ceremonial coin to the team captains, explaining which side of the coin is "heads" and which is "tails." Unlike our U.S. coinage, no one's image is pictured on the Super Bowl coin, so which side is which is not obvious. It seems to me that the same can be said about people, who, according to the Bible, are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

Those two sides of each person's makeup warrant a careful look and some explanation. Without God's grace and our diligence, our wonderfully made "coin" can flip to its fearfully made side. We can see how this happens by looking at the apostle Peter in the Bible.

Simon Peter played a major role in the early church. He was a fisherman who followed Jesus immediately when called. He became one of Jesus' three closest disciples, and the leader among the apostles. He was the first to attest that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Following Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter boldly addressed the huge crowd at Pentecost, proclaiming Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. He took on both the religious establishment and the civil authorities, fearlessly continuing to teach, preach, and heal in Jesus' name, regardless of personal consequences that included imprisonment and martyrdom.

All of this and more exhibited Peter's wonderfully made side, instilled by God and used mightily for his purposes. But sometimes, the very human flip side of that coin showed up.

At times, Peter's bold enthusiasm got in the way. When Jesus first confided to the apostles that He "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again...Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him" (Mark 8:31–32). Peter's knee-jerk protest was well-meant, but brash and short-sighted. Jesus set him straight in no uncertain terms, saying, "Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but the things of man" (Mark 8:33).

Peter's loyal but misguided response to the reality of Jesus' mission was triggered again in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:1–11). When Judas led the captors there, Jesus freely surrendered to them; but Peter drew his sword and cut off the high priest's servant's ear. Once again, Jesus overruled Peter's impulsiveness, reminding him of the God-given mission: "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

The Lord surely forgave Peter for his undisciplined enthusiasm, as He forgave him for a much greater transgression (Matthew 26:69–75; John 21:15–19). And we can learn from Peter's foibles, blessedly included in the Bible to help us see that even wonderful traits like loyalty and vigor have to be bridled by wisdom, faith, and understanding, or they will fail us.

During this Lenten season, as we examine our shortcomings, it would be instructive to examine our strengths as well. If we flip the wonderful side of that coin over, and ask for the mind of Christ, He will show us the fearful side and how it may be tripping us up.

For example, is our strong leadership ability making it easy to disregard another's point of view? Might our pleasant, peaceful temperament be tempting us to stay silent in the face evil or

wrongdoing? Is our willingness to serve wherever asked leading us to neglect our primary calling? Is our penchant for piety making us rigid?

Virtually every strength has a shadow side. If we succumb to it, we can humbly repent, be forgiven, and be strengthened anew by God's unwavering love, for his redemptive purposes -- just like Peter.

Because, like him, despite our faults and failings, the image on our "coin" is God's: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux