

Sermon: May 12, 2019 – Psalm 23 and John 21: 12-17
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

It was my great joy to spend Holy Week this year in the UK, at Norwich Cathedral. What drew me there, was a series of lectures by Rev. Dr. Malcolm Guite, a Minister, Poet, Chaplain and Musician based at Cambridge University who had been invited for the week. Each evening from Monday to Thursday, and then mid-day on Good Friday, Malcolm would follow a similar pattern: some introductory thoughts, then read one of his scripture-based sonnets, reflect on it then, as he put it, “fold those reflections back into the sonnet, and read it again” followed by a brief time of silence. And each time Malcolm spoke, it was in the context of worship: he would speak either just after we had shared communion, or just before.

Today I’d like to follow that same pattern as we consider the fullness of the life and Ministry of Peter, the one Jesus, the “Good Shepherd” gave the task of “shepherding” the earthly flock. Although this wasn’t one of the Sonnets we heard in Norwich, it’s from the same collection of Malcolm Guite’s poetry and, like the ones he shared with us, comes from the gospel of John. So I’ll start, by sharing a theological point that he repeated each day of Holy Week.

If you’ll recall, the gospel of John starts in a way completely unlike the other gospels, rolling out the concept of Jesus Christ as God’s Word Made Flesh. The prologue John, John chapter 1, goes like this: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ²The Word was with God in the beginning. ³Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being ⁴ through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people.... The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 1-4, 14)

Malcolm’s note for us, is to regard these words, not only as a prologue or preamble to *the gospel of John as a whole*, but to regard it as prologue/preamble to *each portion of the gospel*. For in John’s mind, each word and action of Jesus was an unfolding of nothing less than the light of God, the creative, infinite power that brought the universe into being and holds it in love. Jesus, the great teacher, preacher and healer in a particular time and place is also understood by John to be the Christ, the everlasting one who was present at creation and still present to us now. To quote what I heard (te) in Norwich, “**the Divine actions of Jesus are never only ‘back then and over there’ – they are still fully available to us in our ‘here and now’**...In Jesus, we see the love of God in language we understand. [Jesus], in the body of a human being, teaches us about who God is, and the best and worst of our humanity.”

So with that in mind, let’s hear the “Sonnet for St. Peter” by Rev Dr Malcolm Guite:

Impulsive master of misunderstanding
 You comfort me with all your big mistakes;
 Jumping the ship before you make the landing,
 Placing the bet before you know the stakes.
 I love the way you step out without knowing,
 The way you sometimes speak before you think,
 The way your broken faith is always growing,
 The way he holds you even when you sink.

Born to a world that always tried to shame you,
 Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,
 I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,
 Before you knew how to deserve that name.

And in the end your Saviour let you prove
 That each denial is undone by love.

We are so familiar with the story of Peter, yet I tend to miss the part of Peter's Ministry and relationship with Jesus that today's gospel reading places before us. The first part I am well-familiar with, *Peter the impetuous disciple* who regularly follows the sequence, "ready – fire – aim," leaping ahead of the rest of the disciples when it would be more prudent and useful to think it through first. And I am also well-aware of *the shame of Peter*, saying at the last supper that he would never, ever deny Jesus then almost immediately doing so three times. Our scripture reading today from 21st chapter of John, reminds us of what happens next: aligning with Peter's three-fold denial, Jesus restored him and readied him to leave by asking him three times, "Peter, do you love me?" – to which Peter said, "Yes, Lord, you know I do", to which Jesus said, "then feed and tend my sheep."

Whether you take that as eye-witness reporting or as a masterfully-told story, the power of Peter's restoration by Christ his Lord is one I need reminding of. Yes, we need to acknowledge Peter's denial, which painfully uncovers our human tendency to soften our commitment to God's agenda of love when we feel threatened or even inconvenienced, but we also need, time and time again, the opportunity to hear that *this isn't where God leaves things*. The power of love, which infuses all human life and indeed all of creation, is not so easily thwarted. **God's desire for reconciliation is stronger than our ability to wander off in other ways; God's desire for us to be returned to the fold, is greater than our capacity to find danger and lost-ness.**

If indeed, the preamble to John's gospel is also a preamble to this scene of Jesus restoring Peter to fullness of purpose, we hear this not only as a reconciliation between two estranged friends, but as an expression of God's enormous, foundational love to help us to find new life that transcends the heartbreaking scenes of our lives. Peter had every reason to wake every morning with shame at the way that he had denied all affiliation with Jesus, yet God reached beyond it to say that this would NOT be the single defining moment of his life. While Peter would remain *accountable* to the impact of his denial, throughout his life – for reconciliation does not absolve us of accountability – he would not be confined or defined by those actions. God in Christ gave Peter what he gives to us: the gift of a new day every twenty-four hours, a gift which reconnects us to the love known in the first dawning of the earth and is no less dramatic a fresh start each morning. And part of that gift, was to get Peter and us beyond ourselves. The reply from Jesus wasn't just, "I'm glad you love me Peter, we're good now"; it was, "take that love and make it the foundation of all you do in my name."

I so appreciate Malcolm Guite's poetry and faith, in this expression of Peter's journey of faithfulness and faithlessness and restoration. He acknowledges Peter's compulsiveness, and the way that Jesus renamed him, "Simon the fisherman" being Christened, "Peter the Rock" even though Peter would stumble under the weight of those expectations. And in the final two lines, I am called to acknowledge such an important truth about God and Jesus and the Church and the world and me and you: they say, "And in the end your Saviour let you prove That each denial is undone by love".

I need those final two lines, for I have tended to see it the other way around: that Peter undid a lot of the good he had done as a disciple, with his denial of Jesus. This sonnet quite rightly reverses that, confidently stating that in the final analysis, the holy love we experience in and through Christ has the power to re-integrate a whole bunch of our "undoings." Peter denied Jesus three times and three times Jesus asks Peter to re-declare his love, and that exchange gives Peter (and, by extension, the Church) the task of feeding and tending Jesus' sheep. Within Roman Catholic thought, this is the moment when Peter is installed as the first earthly leader of the Church (in essence, the first Pope), a moment commemorated by a little Church on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

We continue Peter's task of feeding and being fed when we share communion, the symbolic meal founded in Christ's mission of reconciliation, and we feed and are fed as we understand God as the one who restores us and guides us, the very source of love and light and purpose in the world, rather than a small little God who wants to categorize and separate and punish. Feeding upon that word of hope is essential to our fractious, chaotic times, as the messaging that surrounds us encourages suspicion and protectiveness, as women's reproductive rights and the safety of LGBTQ people get rolled back in many jurisdictions, as the deteriorating, unpredictable climate creates a rising despair

world-wide, particularly among young adults, as families devolve into a loose collection of preoccupied individuals dominated by their smartphones. Amidst all of this, Christ re-contextualizes everything, calling us to abandon the insanity of hatred and thoughtlessness and consumption, and return to the holy creative intention that infuses every breath we take. Some things we cannot fully undo but so much of our future remains completely within our deciding: we can embrace the gift of light and life and love, or we can decline the gift in favour of, well, whatever else we would choose. At the end of the day, love has great power to undo harm, and for that I give my thanks and praise.

And with that, we return to the sonnet, and as we did in Norwich, will follow this second reading with a few moments of silence before moving to our next hymn.

A sonnet for St. Peter

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 You comfort me with all your big mistakes;
 Jumping the ship before you make the landing,
 Placing the bet before you know the stakes.
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References cited:

Guite, Malcolm. "A Sonnet for St Peter", found at <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/a-sonnet-for-st-peter/> and included in *Sounding the Seasons*, Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012

Guite, Malcolm. Unpublished addresses at Norwich Cathedral, April 15-19, 2019.

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