

“Being Peter”
Text: John 21:1-19

Prayer: Loving God, let your wisdom guide our understanding. Grant us clarity in proclaiming the truth of your Word. Amen.

Things have calmed down quite a bit since Easter Sunday. Things have settled way down from the exalted cries of “Alleluia, Christ is Risen” to the more practical “let’s get back to life as usual”. Back to square one. We return to our routines - like a pair of old sneakers waiting to be used. That’s what happened with Peter and the rest of the disciples. Without their friend and rabbi Jesus on their side, life gets difficult and uncertain. They were overwhelmed with grief and fear. They felt lost, confused, and scared of what might happen to them. The changes in life were not what they expected and they went back to where they were. They went back to the way it was before – back to square one - to something safe, something familiar. They reverted to old patterns of behaviour and thinking. It seems easier for them to go backwards than to move forward.

Last Sunday, we talked about Doubting Thomas. Today, we have the story of Peter, another character in the gospels often misinterpreted. Peter – one of the first fishermen that Jesus called to be his disciple. Peter - whose name was changed from Simon to Petrus, the rock. Peter- the brash and impulsive one – the one who speaks his mind before thinking it through. Peter – who tried walking on water but failed. Peter - the one who denied Jesus three times. In the Transfiguration story, Peter wants to build monuments for Moses, Elijah and Jesus on top of the mountain. In the footwashing episode , it was Peter who wanted a full body wash from Jesus. It was Peter who cut off the ear of the soldier Malchus, when Jesus was being arrested. You might have other stories to tell about Peter. The truth is – sometimes, we are just like him! We have denied our faith, denied love for others. We have acted impulsively without thinking of the consequences. We have made bad decisions in life. The bottom line in all of this is that we, like Peter, are humans - mortal beings. We are not perfect and we are prone to make mistakes . So, I wonder if it’s time to free Peter from his and our own chains of misunderstanding?

In our Gospel story today, Peter and six other disciples have returned to the Sea of Tiberias, the place where it all began - the place where Simon Peter and his brother Andrew,

brothers James & John were called by Jesus as his first disciples. Life of being a follower of Jesus was both challenging and rewarding. Life for the disciples, particularly Peter, was a rollercoaster of events: the upper room experience, the cross, the denials, the hiding, the empty tomb, the house with its locked doors. Now that Jesus is gone, the disciples went right back to doing what is comfortable, normal, and usual. They got back on the boat and did what they did best. Fishing. Simon Peter, leading the way, decides to go fishing at night. He knows how to do that. It is familiar and comfortable. Perhaps it takes him back to life before Jesus. The others were quick to join him. They fished all night, but nothing came close to the surface or into the net. The fishermen come up empty on all counts—no fish, no food, no future.

My hunch, however, is that Peter is not really trying to catch fish as much as he is fishing for answers. Peter may have left Jerusalem but he cannot get away from three years of discipleship, three years of following Jesus, the last supper, the arrest, the denials. He cannot leave behind the cross, the empty tomb, the house with doors locked tight, the echoes of “Peace be with you.” So Peter fishes. Peter fished for answers. What have I done? What were those three years about? Who was Jesus? Where is he now? Who am I? What will I do now? Where will I go? What will happen to me? Peter was searching for meaning, a way forward, a place in life. Peter, bereft with grief, went fishing in the dark night. Some of us have spent time fishing in the dark; asking the same questions as Peter did, looking for our place in life, seeking peace, and some sense of understanding and meaning. More often than not, fishing in the dark happens in the context of the Good Fridays of our lives - the failures, losses, and sorrows. It happens when we come face to face with the things we have done and left undone. We have all been there, fishing for answers in the darkness.

According to John’s story, just after daybreak, the fog is dense along the lakeshore and the water shines bright and blue. Someone stood on the beach – nobody knew at first that it was Jesus. “Children, you did not catch any fish, did you?” Jesus says. This is more a statement of fact than a question. Jesus is not asking for a fishing report. He is commenting on the reality and emptiness of Peter’s and the other disciples’ lives. Peter was living in the pain of Good Friday. He was fishing on the "Good Friday" side of the boat and the net was empty. There were no fish, no answers, no way forward. Nothing to feed or nourish life. Jesus tells the disciples to drop their nets on the right side of the boat. This movement of the net from one side of the boat

to the other symbolizes the disciples' moments of resurrection: from weeping to moments of joy; from fear to hope; from feelings of guilt to being forgiven. Instantly those tired old nets are filled and fish are jumping out of the water to get into them. A hundred fifty-three of them! Feast! Fullness! Abundance! "It is the Lord," cries John, the beloved disciple, always first to recognize his best buddy, Jesus. Peter flops out of the boat, puts on some clothes, fish in tow.

The smell of fish being broiled and the wondrous sight of bread caught the disciples' attention. If you have been up fishing all night, you are grateful for the fire and food and the hands that prepared and cooked it. If you've been fishing all night, you are hungry for warmth; the land is a welcome friend. "Come and have breakfast," was the invitation. Only days ago, before Jesus' death, there was a table and bread and wine in the upper room. Now it's a beach blanket and some broiled fish and yummy bread. We get the message, whenever Jesus is involved, chances are - you are going to be fed. On that morning of resurrected hope, with the presence of Jesus, there is always food for the journey. A meal of bread and fish is provided by the Risen Christ on the beach, telling us that Good Friday is over - this Risen Christ of Easter appears at meals, breaking bread, sharing the abundance of life.

After a hearty breakfast, Jesus pulled Simon Peter to the side and the question and answer came. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Three times Jesus asked the same question. Frustrated, but earnest, bewildered, but trusting, Peter's story is unfolding from beginning to end. He denied Jesus three times and three times Jesus redeems Peter. He answers yes, all three times. The meaning of love between Jesus and Peter shifted from philios or brotherly love to agape - unconditional, truth-seeking love. A love that blessed Peter to shift his vocation from fishing fish to shepherding people. A final promotion of Peter the Rock. Everything that Peter and the disciples needed to make this shift had been provided: new clothes for their cold bodies; a warm hearty breakfast for the journey; abundance of life on the Easter side of the boat; a new dawn, a new life. From Good Friday people, they became Easter people. And Jesus closes with a resounding "Follow me." A preacher once said that: "Follow me is more about the future than the past. With Jesus, it's not where you've been that matters, but where you'll go, not whether you've made mistakes, but whether you are ready to try again, not about whether you've been wounded in the past, but about how you'll help create a future."

Without Peter, Christianity would never be the same again, particularly in the Roman

Catholic tradition. He was known as the first Pope of Rome and was crucified upside down under Emperor Nero. It is believed that he died on the Vatican Hill – the place where the grandiose Vatican building stands proud to this day. Mentioned 19 times in the NT, numerous books, both canonical and non-canonical, were attributed to Peter. Debie Thomas was right when she declared that relationships, more than anything else, were Jesus' priority. Jesus asks Peter honest and vulnerable-making questions about feeding and tending his sheep. It was in this heart-to-heart conversation that Peter's shame met Jesus's grace. Debie Thomas concludes that when shame encounters the God who is Love, shame burns to ash and scatters.

On this Anniversary Sunday, Jesus invites us to be real, to be honest about who and what we are, even if that means admitting that sometimes we need to admit our failures and shift our priorities. Like Peter, Jesus wanted us to put love above all else - to feed others with the strength we get from our relationship with one another based on Jesus' way of love. Yet there are more challenges and even opportunities to be revealed to each of us on this remarkable journey of faith. May we continue to think freely and talk openly about who we are and what we are called to be. May we continue building a community that has love as its highest aim beyond personal gratification. May we love and serve others not for the sake of charity but in the name of justice-seeking love. May we follow in the steps of those who have given us a great beginning; the founders and foreparents of this congregation, who believed there was an exciting and meaningful ministry to be had in this place and in this community. May God lead us into the future and give us the faith to serve. Jesus asks the same questions he asked Peter on that Sea of Tiberias.

“Members of BCUC, do you love me? Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.” Let these words of Jesus inspire us on our 171st anniversary and beyond. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group, Karoline Lewis, Debie Thomas, Karyn Wiseman.