

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
The Third Sunday of Easter (C)
Sunday, May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20) | Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14 | John 21:1-19

From our Collect this morning:

Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work

There is a legend from the 1500s about a great Japanese emperor who was known for his temper.

He was hosting an important party and asked for all of his most valuable pieces of pottery to be used at a tea ceremony.

One of the servants accidentally broke his favorite bowl.

Everyone in the room gasped and wondered what would happen.

Immediately another grabbed the broken pieces and disappeared.

At the ceremony the next day, the bowl reappeared – but instead of being in pieces, it had been repaired...with gold.

The emperor looked at his prized possession – now with gold veins between the pieces – and said the bowl was more beautiful for having been broken.

This legend explains the Japanese art form called Kintsukuroi.

It is not simply about fixing an object.

It is about the new appreciation that in the gap between the vanity of perfection is something much more precious.

For Christians, I suggest that the gold mending our brokenness is God.

God renews us, even when we are in pieces, and gives us new life.

We need look no further than today's readings.

Today we hear about two men who were broken but made new again through God's healing.

Let's take Paul for example.

Now, Paul, we catch at the beginning of his ministry for Jesus.

Paul was a Pharisee.

And he was famous.

He'd studied under the most well-known and respected rabbis.

He was, in our language, at the top of his game.

The best.

In every respect.

Because of his outstanding intellect and success, Paul was licensed by the chief priests at the synagogue to eliminate this new sect of Judaism called The Way – those were Jews who followed the teachings of Jesus.

He was empowered to do this by any means necessary.

And so he did.

Paul used the Law to torture, humiliate, and even kill his fellow Jews.

Now when we hear about Peter, it seems we catch up with him after losing his way a bit.

After Jesus had died, Peter had probably lost hope in the Messiah and the mission.

Peter had returned home, I imagine feeling like a failure, and went straight back into the family business – fishing.

He was probably both embarrassed and discouraged.

And, to add insult to injury, when the chips were down, Peter was the worst kind of friend.

He lied about Jesus just when Jesus needed his love and support the most.

And not just once.

Three times!

You can almost picture him on the boat, can't you...eyes downcast and a little slump in his posture.

Paul had everything and gave it up for Jesus.

Peter had lost everything – even his hope in Jesus.

And yet, these two men both had their eyes opened.

But what strikes me as most important for us today is that both Peter and Paul are given a new sense of belonging and purpose.

Most modern psychologists tell us every single one of us needs both.

First, a sense of belonging.

We all need to feel accepted by a larger group in order to have a stable identity and sense of self.

Now, particularly today, our American culture tells us identity is an individual affair...

Something we carve out for ourselves and by ourselves.

But, as it turns out, the gift of identity is given to us by those around us.

It is how we see ourselves through the eyes of those closest to us.

Now belonging is different than fitting in.

Fitting in is changing yourself to be acceptable to the group.

Remember Middle School or High School?

Belonging is being found acceptable by your group just as you are.

And we all need to belong.

Jesus brings Peter back into the community and accepts him – for who he is.

Which, if you'll remember, was not that great.

For our friend Paul, he is brought in despite who he was.

And belonging for Paul meant also finding a brand new purpose.

Now purpose is the belief that what we do matters.

Purpose, as it turns out, is one of the great motivators in the world.

More powerful than money or fame or power.

Purpose is believing you have something of value to contribute.

That if we did not show up people would notice.

It draws us again and again into challenging circumstances.

When Jesus gives Peter new purpose, he is very clear:

Nothing big or bold.

Nothing too difficult or crazy.

Feed my sheep.

Tend my flock.

Look out for others and devote yourself to this community.

Peter and Paul's stories today are just two examples of hundreds in scripture that do the same thing.

In fact, these themes of belonging and purpose are so dominant in the biblical story that we've actually created fancy church words to explain them.

Justification is belonging.

It is the promise that you are accepted for who you are by God's grace alone.

It starts with baptism where we become part of a big, crazy, messy family.

Baptism is also where we are called by God to make a difference in the world.

Call is purpose.

Belonging and purpose.

The resurrected Jesus gives Peter and Paul these two things.

And I know God gives us the same.

How do I know that?

Because, honestly, if Peter and Paul are worthy then so are we.

Let's be honest, one was a terrorist and one was a traitor.

But God repaired their brokenness.

And God used both.

Can we be like Paul?

Tenacious.

Devoted.

Finding those who are on the margins.

Seeking those who have never heard the Good News of God's never-failing love.

Can we be like Peter?

Shepherding those who go astray.

Bringing back into our family the ones who might be lost.

Leaving the 99 to find the one.

Paul wasn't perfect but God used him.

Peter wasn't perfect but God used him.

And God uses us.

Because of our imperfections.

In our beautiful but broken world.

Where true beauty comes from both fragility and resilience.

And God will use us, as Rabbi Bruce Lustig of Washington National Hebrew Congregation said, "To keep our eyes focused on God... To allow our hearts to be filled with His love... To persevere in the hard work of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world."

During the remainder of this Easter season, let's promise to let God to mend our fragile lives... to make us more beautiful for having been broken.

And, in the process of allowing God to seep slowly and deliberately into the cracks in our hearts and souls and spirits, we can find the resilience to do more than just go on...

We can find purpose and belonging.

Like Peter.

Like Paul.

Like so many others.

And, I think it is then that we become something new...

And, as our Collect tells us, our eyes will be opened to behold God's redeeming work.

In us.

In others.

And in this broken but beautiful world.ⁱ

ⁱ Resources: The Gospel of John, Vol. 2 by William Barclay; The Rev. David Lose; camiimac.com