

St James United Church



Message for December 14, 2025

Third Sunday in Advent

“Forgiven Peter” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Peter 1:17-23; John 21:4-19; Excerpt from Catherynne Valente, *The Girl Who Fell Beneath Fairyland and Led the Revels There* (Macmillan Publishers, 2013)

Since Easter began, we’ve looked at the impact of the resurrection on individual disciples, first considering Mary Magdalene and how in saying her name Jesus lifted the feelings of shame that had flooded back to her upon his death; then looking at Thomas and the grief Jesus invited him to face by touching his wounds. Today, we turn to Peter, the Rock, and his need for forgiveness.

The story begins with Peter returning to his trade as a fisher, likely because of the profound guilt that he felt over his three-fold denial of Jesus. We could argue his denials were understandable given the situation, and he wasn’t alone in failing Jesus, the other disciples fleeing. But guilt rarely answers to explanations. Peter’s self-worth had disintegrated that Thursday night. He felt anything but a rock. How could he in good conscience stay with the others let alone lead them? Into this mess of guilt and shame, Jesus shows up and asks him three times if he loved him, reconfirming his call, but this time not just to fish for people but to be their shepherd, a pastor. This was less a mission of evangelism as it is encouragement and support of his fellow followers, an important role, and one that made clear that Jesus had forgiven him for what he did.

And that clearly impacted him, giving him the courage to take on a leading role among the others and to spread the gospel as well, travelling through Asia Minor, modern Turkey and tradition has it going to Rome where he was martyred. His being forgiven informs his letter to the Christians in Asia Minor. He asserts that God judges all peoples impartially, is one they can trust and has brought them new birth. He may write about reverent fear, but the divine quality he affirms most is God’s paternal love. Like most parents when their children do wrong, God loves us through it, encouraging us to do better and to learn from our experience. Peter trusted in that and paid it forward. His failure made him a good father, a good pastor, able to draw on his experience to offer understanding, loving his fellow disciples through their failures and encouraging them to grow. I hear that in his call for them to love each other.

But before he could be that father, that pastor, Peter needed not just God’s forgiveness or Jesus’ forgiveness but his own. As he ruminated over his failure, all he could see was his shadow self and all the hurt it had wrought. As Catherynne Valente observes, “a heart can grab hold of old wounds and go sour as milk over them.” I hear some of that in our gospel. The conversation between Jesus and Peter feels like Peter going over the events of that night. Usually as he did that, he likely replayed it more negatively than what happened. We all do it, relive a time we hurt someone we love, did something out of character, and as we focus on what we did wrong and

the guilt and shame we feel, we give that aspect of the memory greater energy. That happens in part because we have terrible memories. Each time we look at our past, we recall it differently, reconstituting it a bit each time, adding details from other experiences to fill gaps, even believing something as happening to us when we were a bystander, making what we remember different from the event. For Peter, I imagine he decided to go back to fishing because he felt he'd let Jesus and everyone else down. It likely clouded him from seeing how much his fellow disciples still looked to him, hence going fishing with him. But he was shackled by the memory of what he had done and so was locked into negative views of himself as well.

Fortunately, the sharing between him and Jesus broke those shackles, ransoming him from his past life as he wrote in his letter. I wonder if the conversation reflected Jesus coming to Peter in the depth of prayer, and this time through grace, he saw things more clearly, realized that at the time he feared for his life and so his denials were automatic, or perhaps he feared for the safety of the other disciples, which is why Jesus called him to tend to his sheep, or he recognized yet other motivations at play. As I said earlier, a parent helps their child to learn from their mistakes and the same applies here. We can let go of the guilt for our failures when we look at the events again wishing to gain insight, especially with the awareness that there are things we could only have learned from what happened and then apply those in the future. Sometimes a failure brings clarity to what is most important to us, which for Peter was his ongoing love for Jesus, and Jesus' ongoing love for him, and as Jesus invited him to care for the others, how much he loved them.

This suggests his conversation with Jesus alternatively happened through one he had with the disciples who went fishing with him, Jesus present as they shared their memories, and in piecing things together, he reframed what happened. This affirms how important it is for us to be here for each other, be a listening ear and encourage one another to apply what we've learned from past failure. We attest in this that people can grow, shouldn't be defined by their past alone. Our faith is about redemption after all, something we're not seeing culturally, be it the tendency to let past wrongs, long-held grudges fuel division, something much in play in current conflicts, or the push to "cancel" others for past or current wrongs, not willing to dialogue or give them the chance to change. Peter writes that we were ransomed from the futile ways of our ancestors. These two approaches feel quite futile. Our gospel points us toward the alternative, to create places where we model the forgiveness and learning of the exchange between Jesus and Peter, intentional communities where people get a second, third, however many chances they need, where we encourage each other to learn from the past and learn from each other too. In this we model a way that brings new life and leads to lasting peace. Such a community of care helped Peter recommit to being the Rock for others and it helps each of us find our calling too.

Be it in prayer or conversation, the Risen Christ was present to Peter, helping him come to terms with his past, liberating him from the hold it had on him, which ultimately is what forgiveness is about, and helping him reclaim his identity as a child of God, a follower of Jesus and a pastor for his friends. The Risen Christ is likewise present for us, forgiving us, liberating us, helping us grow. That's the gift of Easter, the lasting impact of the resurrection, not just for Peter and the disciples but for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.