



## Richmond Hill Reflections

“Starting Over” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 3, 2020; Fourth Sunday of Easter (Anniversary Sunday)

Reading: John 21:15-25; English translation of “Grasses” by Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi

So here we are. Back on the beach. Today we’re getting to the main point of the story, Jesus and Peter having a heart to heart. We’re told this is the third time Jesus appeared, but as I shared last week if that’s the case Peter’s behaviour is odd, taking up his old job after being commissioned to share the good news. Unless this story actually captures the first resurrection appearance, the one Paul refers to in First Corinthians. This makes sense to me. As I said last week, Peter likely carried a lot of shame. He must have felt he’d let Jesus down, had no right to consider himself a disciple, let alone be a leader. Yet something shifted. Not just in Acts but in various epistles, we hear that he regained his nerve and became someone the disciples could rally around. How?

Much is made of Jesus asking Peter three times if he loved him. We assume a result of his three-fold declaration is forgiveness, yet nowhere does Jesus say to Peter “I forgive you.” I’ve quoted Richard Rohr before: “Jesus didn’t come to change God’s mind about us, but to change our minds about God.” Perhaps as a corollary he came to change our minds about ourselves as well. In the end, what is Peter guilty of? Whenever he said “I am not” to the question of knowing Jesus, he denied being Jesus’ disciple, but it goes deeper. In John’s gospel Jesus keeps saying “I am... light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life. These are identity statements, affirmations that he’s sent by God, shares in God’s life. Jesus washed his disciples’ feet as a way for them to share in him and also to be sent by God. By saying “I am not”, Peter distanced himself from this.

And in the end Jesus got that. There is word play in the conversation that we miss in English. Jesus twice asks if Peter *agapes* him to which Peter says he *philia*s Jesus. In Christian theology *agape* came to be seen as self-giving love, the love expressed on the cross. Peter couldn’t bring himself to say he *agapes* Jesus but Jesus asked him to be a shepherd just the same. I think that is where the shift happens. As Jesus accepts Peter where he is at, something opens up in Peter. He can claim his identity in Christ after all, accept what it means to be sent as Jesus had. Thankfully he could. Who knows if we’d be here if Peter never felt renewed in his call, didn’t accept what it meant for his feet to be washed, to be baptized into Jesus’ ministry and sent to share God’s love? Peter learned to give himself away in love and accept people as he had been. He became a bridge between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. In this he created space for people to live together in love, witnessing what the world can be if we all let go for others. The other apostles did likewise, sharing the good news. As a result we have many different churches, each shaped by culture as much as the gospel.

The church is still in conversation with culture and context, each generation responding to the situation in which it finds itself. Ministering in an established church that was cosy with the ruling class, John Wesley focused on the needs of those in front of him, the poor and forgotten. He accepted them and adapted to the situation: he preached outdoors, organized small groups, appointed itinerant lay preachers. The result was a whole new generation of people who not only shared life in Christ but shared themselves with others to make a difference in the world. Early Methodists were known for their work in both prison reform and in the abolition of slavery.

That is our heritage as a congregation. For two hundred and ten years we too have responded to new situations with love and compassion. In the early days our first members were social and political reformers, so not much has changed. Later we set up the food bank, offered support to refugees, advocated for youth. Though Krasman Centre lunches are on hold for the time being, they will ramp up again. We are a community where everyone is accepted as they are, and just as we created space for people to come together in the early days, we're doing the same in The Village Commons.

Over the years we've had ups and downs, but each time have been Peter, sharing the compassion we experienced. Now is no different. At the start of the pandemic our first response was to offer one another support. Realizing that many in our congregation were among the most vulnerable to the virus, we did what was needed - reached out and checked in, especially with those who might need help with errands. We also shifted worship online, knowing we could only be a gift of help and love if we experienced spiritual support and care. But that's only half of our response. As the pandemic continues, we're called to discern our ongoing purpose. What are we being sent to do? Who is before us and what are their needs? How will we help as more and more social gaps are revealed? How do we reach beyond ourselves, using the online presence we've been pushed onto by the lockdown? How will we meet the needs of our neighbours? What will we let go of to do so? We're OK financially, albeit feeling pressure as our congregation ages. What if the pandemic compounds that? How will we respond? Be church without a building? Use it in new ways that we haven't even considered before? How do we nurture relationships, how do we build community if this becomes our new normal? This experience is teaching us many things about what it means to be church in the here and now. What will we bring forward from these lessons into the future?

In the end I have every confidence we will find a way. After all, we're not alone in this. We stand on the shoulders of our forebears cheering us on. Just as they responded to their context, so will we. And Jesus is with us. As we claim our ongoing identity in him, he gives us the strength we need to share the good news. In the end we are like grass, renewing each season. In Christ we have the same resilience, always finding new strength, and new ways to share God's love. Amen.