

Turning for Good (Friday and Beyond)

We might receive foot-washing and communion and yet still not grasp the cross. Perhaps our need for that cross is not yet clear. We may still believe in our own capacity to follow Him, the self-inspired power of allegiance to Jesus.

Peter the 'Rock,' full of bluster and unrefined zeal, helps us here. He believed himself to be among the most radical followers of Jesus. Pride came before his fall on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. Until the midnight hour, Peter continued to be stumbled by the prospect of Christ's humiliation.

He still did not grasp the cross. First he had to suffer the humiliation of his own infidelity.

How often have we seen this before? Many of us have followed Christian leaders whom we granted 'Rock-like' status, only to be devastated when they fell. How could they? How could men or women espousing, say, 'traditional values,' prostitute themselves and so breach trust with us? (Not to mention with their families, their churches, and the greater Christian community?)

Easily. We can preach the cross and its merits for everyone else yet avoid it entirely when it comes to our own need for the cross. We can live in that divide as long as our weaknesses are kept in check. But seasons change, and under the stress of real life, weaknesses become wickedness.

God exposes us as the cross-'dodgers' that we are. Such exposure breaks ground in us for mercy.

Jesus' prophesied Peter's three-fold denial of Himself. In Luke 22: 54-62, we behold its fulfillment: the Rock boldly distances himself from Christ by refusing any connection with Jesus. The one who set himself apart by naming Christ as God, the sole source of salvation, refuses Him when the heat is on.

Peter tries to save himself in the face of Christ's capture; to three inquirers, he denies the truth about Jesus and his own discipleship.

But the power of the passage rests not on his denial but rather on Peter's repentance. By this point, we are used to blind, blustery Peter. But repentant Peter is quite another thing. The key verses in Luke 54-62 come after his third denial: "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter...and he went outside and wept bitterly." (vs. 61, 62)

Jesus turned first. This was the threshold of change. Yes, Jesus had rebuked the Rock sternly before, had washed his feet, fed him bread from Heaven—all preparation for the pivot that would change Peter forever.

Jesus turned first. One glance from the eyes of Jesus, burning with tender mercy, and Peter saw his sin. More importantly, he saw Jesus as the sole enabler and object of his devotion.

Jesus turned first. One wise woman put it this way: “In the presence of His integrity, our pretense is exposed. In the presence of His constancy, our cowardice is exposed. In the presence of His fierce love for us, we either fall down and worship Him or do anything we can to extinguish the light...”

Perhaps Peter would have rather looked in any one’s face than Jesus’ at that moment. He was exposed—his self-deceiving ways more apparent than at any other time. But such exposure ploughed deep ground in Peter’s heart. That is Real Presence: the Lamb of God revealing the truth of His servant’ sin in order to heal him.

Peter broke, and water poured from the Rock. His tears manifested a turning unto the Savior as he had never done before.

True repentance can occur only as God looks at us. He turns toward us, our only hope from the stranglehold of both the prostitute and the Pharisee. We can suffer a kind of narcissistic sorrow over sin. Truly this is wounded self-love, founded more on social shame or loss of a beloved idol than over genuine spiritual grief.

But when the God of fierce love turns toward us, we can feel deeply our sorrow over sin—our inspired regret at running away from our only Hope, the sole Source that loves us deeply in the full glaring light of who we are in our pretense and cowardice.

One wise man said it like this: “Genuine repentance consists of feeling deeply our helplessness, of knowing how God comes to us when we are completely broken.”

God deals firmly yet gently with us in our waywardness, the gap between what He wills, and who we are. He persists to shine the light of His mercy, daring to expose sin and brokenness in order to heal us.

Henry Drummond writes: “Today perhaps the Lord is turning and looking at you. Right where you are, your spirit is far away, dealing with some sin, some unbearable weight. God is teaching you the lesson Himself, the bitter and sweet lesson of your life, in heartfelt repentance. Stay where you are. Today, don’t look away.”

Peter reveals to us the revelation of sin that invites mercy. But not all turn toward Christ in the light of such exposure. A tearful pivot is one thing; a posture of murder—seeking to extinguish the Light—is another.

One pastor observed: “I remember being at a retreat when the leader asked us to think of

someone who represented Jesus in our lives. One woman said: 'I had to think hard about that one: I kept thinking—who is it that told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'

'This is the verdict—light came into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.' (Jn 3:19, 20)

"According to John, Jesus died because He told the truth to everyone He met. He was the truth, the perfect mirror in which people saw themselves in God's own light. The religious and political leaders were so appalled by what they saw in that mirror they smashed it. They smashed Him every way they could."

According to the Gospels, this 'smashing' included men: spitting in His face, striking Him with fists, slapping Him and mocking Him with prophecies, then stripping and flogging Him, followed by repeated head-bashings. The insults and mockery continued throughout His slow, agonizing death on the cross.

On Good Friday, we are reduced to mercy. In the mirror of His suffering unto death, we are exposed as those whose 'sin-sickness' persuaded Him to become our cure. Let His merciful eyes catch your gaze as you behold Him, Crucified for you.
Amazing love, none greater.

'As You have shown us mercy, O God, in the desert places of our lives, would You show mercy to the beleaguered state of marriage in the USA? As the Perry vs. Schw. case wends its way to the National Supreme Court, prepare for Yourself a victory. We shall render to Caesar what is Caesar's but we shall prayerfully fight for what is Yours, O God. Prepare the hearts of each justice, especially Justice Anthony Kennedy, to uphold marriage according to Your merciful design. Remember mercy, O God.'