

Westgate Baptist Community
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Receiving Grace – Practicing Love (Peter’s re-instatement)

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

John 21-1-19

Intro:

There is a wonderful symmetry to John’s Gospel.

In the beginning of John (chp 2) the first miracle story is the one that takes place at the Wedding in Cana – as story of overflowing jars of wine.

Here in the last chapter we have the final miracle recorded this time a story of overflowing nets.

Both stories reveal the true identity of Jesus to his followers and both stories proclaim the abundance of God’s grace.

Other themes are also echoed here. The same themes of grace and the identity of Jesus are found in the feeding of the five thousand (chp 6) which are echoed here in Jesus feeding the disciples breakfast on the beach.

The mention of a charcoal fire for cooking the breakfast meal is an interesting detail. The last time such a fire is mentioned in John’s Gospel, Peter is warming his hands over one as he denies knowing Jesus.

No one likes being reminded of their failures. Particularly in this corporate world where everything is getting better, expanding in size, growing in profits, “enhancing potential outcomes going forwards” to use some mind numbing buzz phrases. We can’t afford to let anyone know that we might be wrong sometimes, or may even need to admit a little shame...

Just this week civilian contractor, Tami Silicio, was instantly sacked from her job (and her husband too) because she published a photograph of a planeload of flag draped coffins being the latest batch of 713 coalition soldiers killed in Iraq (including 25 or more suicides). The US administration does not want the world to reminded of the true cost of the invasion. And they don’t want to entertain for a moment what is now becoming increasingly obvious: that like the landing at Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 the invasion of Iraq was a big mistake..

At a personal level Peter is reminded of his spectacular failure in denying he even knew Jesus 3 times as he was being tried at the High Priest's courtyard.

It is one thing to be reminded of your failures.

It is another thing to be reminded by the very person you let down.

It is another thing again to be reminded that this person accurately predicted that you would fail before the event.

And it is a transforming experience to be loved and accepted and affirmed as we are – failures and all.

In this post-resurrection story John has Jesus offer Peter three opportunities to undo those denials and declare his love.

Jesus tells Peter what it will mean to live out that love: to feed or tend Jesus' sheep. In the context of John's gospel how has Jesus fed his disciples? By drawing them near to the realm of God through revealing the abundance of God grace and mercy to them.

To practice grace and mercy and thus draw others near to the realm of God just as they drew in a big lot of fish.

This is a story for the early Easter community. It is a story that draws together many strands in the gospel but it is chiefly about grace and transforming forgiveness...

This story reminds me of three characteristics of the God's Grace and forgiveness as is it is known to us or should be known to us a resurrection community of faith..

1. Grace and Forgiveness are not about denial.

The remarkable thing about Peter's re-instatement is the way that is linked so clearly to his original failure.

We are often told that we should forgive and forget. But I think that I am glad that God's love forgives and remembers. There is something grounded, genuine and transforming about a love that knows our weaknesses yet loves us just the same.

I am not suggesting that we nurture past pain or turn over our own mistakes or those of others till we know every little detail, every horrible minute, or every excruciating word. What it does mean is the ability and desire to look past, not away, but past the mistakes to whole person. To know we are loved in this way is to be liberated from guilt and released from paralysing regret.

Healing from the poison of a carefully nurtured grudge is also a result of being open to the grace of God as Peter experienced it.

Some years ago now, I was deeply hurt by someone who was supposed to be supporting me. I discovered that not only did he personally disagree with me, but had actively sought to undermine my reputation by amplifying stories of my mistakes and encouraging unfounded and unfair criticism. I went through a stage of feeling so angry toward this particular bloke that whenever I so much as heard his name or saw someone or something that reminded me of him or anything about him – it made my pulse race and my face flush.

I was sharing this with a wise spiritual counsellor I was seeing at the time and thinking it was so good to have a good whinge to someone who could listen and nod a lot. But when I finished he simply looked at me and asked: Geoff, what is Christlike in this man? It was a devastating question and it melted me to tears as I realised how such a simple practice could transform my anger into love. That could for a moment help me to see the humanity and possibility in my enemy.

2. Grace and Forgiveness are best learnt in a Community

Leunig's cartoon about the man having "episodes of compassion"

The threefold question, answer and commission in verses 15-17 underscore that words of love must be matched by a life of love. Peter's love of Jesus will be evidenced when he cares for Jesus' sheep, not apart from that care. This has an echo here too of Jesus' core commandment, that his disciples love one another as he has loved them.

Like all the practices of our Christian faith, Forgiveness and love are best learned in a community of faith that is practicing together the dance of forgiveness in response to God's active presence amongst them.

We don't learn to dance on our own, but by dancing with others. We aren't born knowing how to think well of others, how to forgive. But as baptised people who are part of the post-resurrection community we will find ourselves in communities where forgiveness happens.

If we are to grow in the practice of forgiving one another, we need to come to a better understanding of the shape of God's practice of forgiving us.

Jesus in his life gives forgiveness a human, physical form, showing us a way of life that we are called to imitate. Similarly, his cross and resurrection provide the context for us to receive God's forgiveness and to forgive others in God's name. Our worship of the risen Christ sets the context for us to find new ways of coping with the sorts of conflicts and tragedies that can so easily destroy us and others..

The following true story I related in a sermon last year but it is worth re-telling..

A twelve year old boy named John was playing one day with the nine year old girl who lived next door. Her name was Marie. Unfortunately, they found a loaded pistol in a drawer in one of the bedrooms of the house. Before long their make-believe game turned into a tragic nightmare and little Marie was dead. Everyone in the small town attended the funeral of the little girl – everyone except John, who could not face anyone and refused to talk to anyone.

The morning after the funeral, Marie's older brother went next door to talk to John. "John, come with me," he said. "I want to take you to school." John refused, saying, "I never want to see anyone again. I wish it was me who was dead." The brother insisted and finally persuaded John to go with him. The brother talked with the school principal and asked him to call a special assembly. Five hundred and eighty students filed into the gymnasium. Marie's brother stood before them and said, "A terrible thing has happened; my little sister was accidentally shot by one of your fellow classmates. This is one of those tragedies that marring life. Now I want you all to know that my family and John's family have been to church together this morning and shared in Holy Communion." then he called John next to him, put his arm around his shoulders, and continued: "This boy's future depends much on us. My family has forgiven John because we love him. Marie would want that. And I ask you to love and forgive him too". Then he hugged John, and they wept together.

Though this was as much the beginning as it is the end of the story. Marie's brother sought out John when he most needed it and risked his own feelings of grief to offer a judgment of grace to John. The pattern of Christ's own ministry, grace and forgiveness provided the context within which Marie's brother was able to offer specific words, gestures, and actions. In this way, the possibilities of a community dealing with a great and painful brokenness were transformed.

For us, as for Marie's family, God's forgiveness occurs when real human behaviour is transformed by grace.

As individuals and as members of a this community of faith we will see real lives transformed by grace as we practice the way of forgiveness.

Sometimes it can be an incredible challenge as in this story but it can happen in small and apparently insignificant ways as well. Which brings me to my final characteristic of God's Grace and Forgiveness..

3. Grace and Forgiveness are practiced in big and small ways

The final part of today's reading in John 21 there is an indirect prediction about Peter's martyrdom. Jesus predicts that he will die for his faithful commitment to love and follow Jesus. Thus ensues an exchange where Peter wants to know about the other

disciple (called here the one whom Jesus loved) and how or if he was going to end up.

After all what is my insignificant efforts compared to someone who will lay down their life or put their life on the line daily for their love of Jesus? Is my discipleship in the same league as Martin Luther King or Oscar Romero?

It is worth noting that the stories of John 21 begin, not with Peter's call to martyrdom or the praise of the beloved disciple's witness, but with a story of Jesus' gracious gifts. Jesus gave gifts to all the disciples in the boat: Peter, the martyr; the beloved disciple, the witness; Thomas and Nathanael, who wanted to see to believe; to the sons of Zebedee and the unnamed disciples, about whom the Gospel of John records nothing except that they are disciples. For all of these people, whose discipleship would take varied forms, Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish and hosted breakfast on the beach. Those who will give up their lives in love, those who struggle daily in what may seem the smallest places to bear witness to Jesus' gracious love – all receive gifts.

The discipleship of the believing community, this suggests, begins with the affirmation and celebration of the gifts of God in Jesus. The embodiment of that grace and love in the life of faith in big and small ways, in the way we forgive ourselves, in our worship and faith development, in our community and social life, in our ability to know the past mistakes but forgive anyway, in the way we relate to the people we work with and encounter during each week. In all these ways and more we can be a transforming community that is responding in real and concrete ways to Jesus gracious call to Follow Me.