

17 May 2009

Coming Clean

John 21:15-17

One of the most important components of a Greek tragedy is the fatal flaw. The word used to describe that flaw was the word '*hamartia*.' Technically, *hamartia* literally meant 'to miss the mark', but in Greek tragedies it came to represent something more. The *hamartia* was an error in judgment or unwitting mistake in the actions of the hero. For example, the hero might attempt to achieve a certain objective. By making an error in judgment, however, the hero instead achieves the opposite of their objective, usually with disastrous consequences. Keep that in mind this morning.

As we continue this series of Easter messages that will take us into Pentecost, it's good to be reminded of what we continue to celebrate during this season:

*We celebrate Easter to remember the miraculous raising from the dead of Jesus the Messiah—God in human form, who came and lived and served and loved and died in order to demonstrate the depth of God's love for all of his creation.*

That's our baseline—the foundation for whatever else we might say in this season or any season. At Easter we celebrate the lengths God will go to in order to demonstrate his love for us.

But sometimes that love requires something of us. Sometimes God's love calls us to live differently, to reconsider things we used to believe. Sometimes God asks us to do something, not to earn his love, but in response to having already received his love.

*15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

*16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"*

*He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."*

*17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"*

*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"*

*He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

We've been looking at the appearances of Jesus after Holy Week—after the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus appeared to his disciples and to hundreds of other people in those strange days after his death. It's those appearances, and the way they're written about and understood in the Scriptures, that make up the basis for our faith—for our hope that Christ really is who he said he is, and that he can do what he said he would do.

We've also been trying to get some perspective on just exactly what the Atonement means

for us. The Atonement is the theological term for what God has done to bring us back to him. During the run up to Easter we talked about how Christ's atoning work offers healing for all of our relationships: with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth. This is crucially important stuff for us to wrestle with as we grow in our faith as disciples of Jesus.

The Atonement is like a drama that happens in three acts: the Cross, the Resurrection, and Pentecost—the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the Cross, a price is paid for the sin and brokenness in all of our lives. The resurrection—the Easter miracle—demonstrates that God has power over all things, even death. And the gift of the Holy Spirit is God's way of inspiring and empowering each of us to be the people he made us to be in the first place.

We should be very clear on this point: It's the Atonement—the work God has done to bring us back to him—it's the Atonement that makes us who we are as Christian individuals and as a community of Christian faith.

I've quoted Scot McKnight here before. Listen to how he describes the link between the Atonement and the church:

'We cannot back down from this. If this is Jesus' vision then the creation of a community where God's will is done is inherent to the meaning of atonement...Atonement, if we let the Bible speak for itself, is about creating communities of faith wherein God's will is done and lived out.'

This understanding of the community of faith as a place where God's will is done and lived out is crucial for understanding our text today.

So back to our story of Jesus and Peter. To grasp what happens in our text today we have to go back to the relationship Jesus had with Peter as they worked together over the past three years.

In Matthew 16 Jesus had set Peter aside as the leader of his movement—as part of the foundation for his church. Peter was the first to understand who Jesus really was, and because of that Jesus said to him: 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of John—now you will be called Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.'

But just 10 chapters later Peter had denied Jesus when he needed him most. Peter was given three chances to acknowledge that he was a follower of Jesus, and each time he got angry and said he didn't know him.

And so just before our text today Peter and some of the disciples were going back to work as fishermen. They had a lousy night's fishing, and as they were coming in Jesus told them to throw their nets in one more time. This time they caught a huge load of fish—so many that they couldn't lift the net back into the boat.

When they were all ashore they ate some grilled fish together and then Jesus looked at Peter and started to grill *him*. Do you love me?...Do you truly love me?...Do you love me? Peter says yes all three times, and in the end Jesus moves on as if everything was fine.

There are several reasons why Jesus did what he did with Peter.

We've already seen that Jesus had set Peter aside as the leader of his movement, but also that Peter had denied Jesus when he needed him most. Because of that, Peter needed to be restored.

Jesus knew that if he built his church on someone with unresolved, unconfessed, unforgiven sin—if Jesus built his church on someone who hadn't come clean—the whole thing would crumble. That's where we come back to the ancient Greek tragedy idea of the fatal flaw.

There's a lesson for us as we think back on the word *hamartia*. In the evolution of that word from ancient Greek to marketplace Greek—that's the Greek used in the NT—in that evolution the word *hamartia* stopped describing a dramatic fatal flaw, and came to represent the biblical idea of sin.

Some people have seen this passage as Jesus' way of humiliating or punishing Peter—that's certainly how Peter saw it. But it's closer to the truth to say that Jesus was restoring Peter by giving him three chances to say what he should have said in Jerusalem. Jesus was giving Peter a chance to say sorry for his sin, and to get on with his life.

What I like about this is that Jesus doesn't ask Peter to grovel or define his faith with some complex doctrinal statement. Jesus simply asks him if he loves him, and when he says he does, Jesus recommissions Peter for the job Jesus wanted him to have all along: 'Feed my lambs,' Jesus said. 'Take care of my sheep.'

This story, more than most, gets at the heart of the Christian faith. We are created and called for a purpose, but we get in our own way and have to be restored—recommissioned for the job Jesus wanted us to have all along. But first, and then from time to time along the way, we stop to say sorry for our sins.

That's an idea that matters for us as individuals, and also as a community of faith—as a community of the Atonement.

As individual disciples part of the discipline of living the life of faith is to come before God in confession every so often. Every person has a past—every person has a past—and it's in confession—in repentance and forgiveness, that we get cleaned off and made ready to be faithful people again.

But as a church that gets more complicated. Every church has history—some of it great and some of it not so great at all. Every church has a past, and it's always up to the present congregation and leadership to manage that past and get on with the business of being an effective, caring, creative community of Christian faith.

Even this church has a few dark moments in its past—times when it wounded people by not doing what it should have done. Those dark moments need to be acknowledged and

reconciled so that this place can be restored like Peter—restored to accomplish what God has in store for us.

It would be nice if we didn't have to do this every so often.

When I bought my first house I learned that one of the fees you pay in the States is for something called 'title insurance.' Title insurance is protection against claims on the property based on the actions of a previous owner. It covers all kinds of things to make sure that when you buy a house you actually get what you're paying for.

Why do I bring that up? Because title insurance doesn't exist in the church.

Apart from repentance and forgiveness and restoration, there isn't any protection against claims on this community based on the actions of previous owners.

It would be nice if we didn't have to do this every so often.

But we do, and we will. Not to settle scores or continue battles or to be vindictive, but so that we can be a community that lives as if the atonement really means what Christ said it means. So that we can be a place where God's will is done and lived out by each of us on our own, and by all of us when we gather as a church.

So back to the Greek tragedies—the goal, desired outcome in a Greek tragedy was something called catharsis.

Catharsis is another Greek word—this one means "purification", "cleansing" or "clarification." In different forms it can mean "to purify, or to purge," or "pure or clean."

In the Christian tradition we call that repentance and forgiveness and restoration. Those are normal, necessary parts of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. When we miss the mark—when we sin—God's forgiveness is there for anyone and any church who is willing to repent. It's God's forgiveness and grace that keep our past actions from becoming fatal flaws.

We need that grace in our own lives, and we need it in this church.

We're going to revisit this idea from time to time here in the coming year, and your church Council is going to be talking about it, too.

As we travel this road together it'll be good to remember Peter the disciple—the one who Jesus called, the one who committed a terrible sin, the one who was restored through repentance and forgiveness, and the one who ultimately served the church faithfully and sacrificially.

As with all things, we bring our lives and this church before the throne of God as a reminder that we are his, and that we've been purchased with a price.

In the end that's the only title insurance we can truly have or hope for. Amen.

Because the sinless savior died,  
My sinful soul is counted free;  
For God the Just is satisfied,  
To look on Him and pardon me.

Let's sing that together: 'Before the Throne of God Above.'