

Fierce Love aka Challenging the Powers

Third Sunday of Easter

April 10, 2016

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Texts: Acts 9.1-6(7-20);
Psalm 30;
Revelation 5.11-14;
John 21.1-19

Last Sunday while chatting with some people after worship we stumbled into conversation about the rooster - the weathervane - on the top of our steeple. They had this vague memory that the symbol of the rooster was connected to the story of Peter on the night of Jesus' arrest. They were right. It does call to mind how Jesus told Peter on the night he was arrested that before the cock crowed he would deny Jesus three times. We talked about it was strange to have a symbol of personal failure at the top of a church steeple. And then we laughed thinking that perhaps it was appropriate for Calvinists who talk so much about sin.¹

Last Sunday during the adult education hour, Dr. Jim Brownson made a comment about Peter as he was teaching on the gospel of John that I've been thinking about all week especially in light of Pastor Gordon's sermon last week. When I talked about the rooster as a symbol of personal failure that is how many of us read that moment for Peter. It was a failure of moral courage on his part. What Jim invited us to think about was the way that Peter, like Jesus, was caught up in the systems and structures of power that were operating on that night. To name this as being just about Peter and his moral courage misses the mark because it fails to take into account the spiritual realities operating in those systems. What Pastor Gordon spoke about last week as *The Powers*.²

Walter Wink whom Gordon referenced last week talked about the way that systems and structures of power and authority are good. They part of

¹ See the history of the Hope Church weathervane including the long history of this symbol on the Hope Church website: <http://hopechurchrca.org/index.php/facility/>

² See Sermon from April 3 on the Hope Church website: <http://hopechurchrca.org/index.php/archives/>

God's good creation. They are also, often, quite broken and corrupted and in need of redemption. Another piece of what Walter Wink talks about in his work is the outer and inner forms of power. The outer forms are visible. It's what you can see and describe: who the players are, how they relate to each other, what are the rules etc... There is also an inner form within power structures that is not visible. Wink talked about this in terms of the driving spirit that animates an institution.³

When you look at the driving spirit that was animating the temple police, the high council, and the roman guards on that night it was a spirit of intimidation imposed through tactics of terror. Peter did not have a change of heart that night. He did not decide that everything Jesus had been teaching was wrong and he was going to change sides. No! In the face of those powers he was simply terrified. He was traumatized. Jesus' whole ministry was about confronting the powers; to dismantle the systems and structures that had become so corrupt and broken and help envision how we could rebuild our communal life. And it's not just about how the structures and systems are put together but also about the spirit that animates those systems. Jesus was interested in creating communities where the authority and sense of loyalty to that authority is fostered not out of intimidation and fear but out of a shared sense of purpose and passion. What Peter was caught up in that night was not his own moral and personal failure, he was swept up in something much bigger and more insidious that was animating the Powers of their day.

What Jesus does with his resurrected life is to confront those powers. We see this in the book of Acts today. Saul has been posturing, flexing his muscles, and asserting his authority through that same spirit of intimidation and fear. Jesus confronts him through that vision on the road to Damascus. Notice that this is not a public forum. The only ones to hear are the men who are traveling with him. Saul has clearly addressed large crowds. The vision could have come at a moment when many more could have heard the confrontation and where Saul could have been humiliated and shamed and put in his place. But that is not the spirit that animates

³ This article gives a good summary of Walter Wink's theology:
<https://peacetheology.net/2012/05/12/a-tribute-to-walter-wink/>

Jesus' power. In fact, the question that Jesus poses to Saul is intensely vulnerable. It is a question that is rooted in love: "why are persecuting me?"

That is a fierce question that cuts to the heart. And it changes Saul. He recognizes that he has been wrong. Jesus was not here to destroy the ways of God. Which was, by the way Saul's motivation. He saw himself as a protector of God's ways. No Jesus was here to embody the ways of God; to redeem what had become so corrupted. In this moment of loving but fierce confrontation, Saul begins to see the world through an entirely different lens. The text uses the metaphor of scales falling from his eyes. But I think of it as being like that moment when the right lens is put in front of your eyes and you can suddenly see the world with perfect clarity.

The engagement with Peter has a different feel to it but functions in the very same way. When Jesus comes to Peter he asks an intensely vulnerable question as well: "do you love me?" He asks this not because Peter ever lost his love for Jesus. Peter doesn't need to be changed so much as he needs to be built back up. Peter has lost his sense of purpose. He was so defeated and so traumatized by everything that happened, he needed to have his passion reignited. He needed Psalm 30 to be spoken back into his heart: he needed to be drawn up, healed, restored to life from among those who had gone down to the Pit. He needed to be reminded that while anger lasts but a moment, God's favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning. The Powers had done a number on Peter and the way that Jesus confronts the powers is through fierce love.

For Saul and for Peter these moments with Jesus came directly in a vision in the case of Saul and from an appearance of the resurrected Lord in the case of Peter. For most of us in this time and this day, the encounters that confront us or build us up – the way that Psalm 30 gets spoken into our life – the way that the fierce love of God reaches us is through the people who surround us; the ones we go through life with us. I saw it happen this week two different times. one was really surprising to me because it was a moment on TV on the show *Empire* of all places. A word of caution: this program is in many ways a case study into total depravity (but with really awesome sound track). It's about the family behind this powerful Hip-

Hop/R&B record label called *Empire*. In this family of brothers, one of them has lost a child to miscarriage. He is the one in the family with a strong Christian faith and is involved in the life of the church. The other ones? Not so much. In this moment when the character, Andre, is devastated by this loss his brothers who are the musicians write and sing a song for him. It was a beautiful scene in which they do in their own way precisely what I just said: they speak Psalm 30 into their brother's life. Here are some of the lyrics of the song *Good People*:

Sometimes it's hard to pray
Sometimes it's hard to stay grateful
It's painful, hurts so bad
Sometimes it's hard to breathe
Gets hard to keep goin'
We keep holdin' on to what could have been

One day its gonna turn into another season
Your gonna see that
All your tragedy
You had was for another reason
It's just a temporary goodbye
So ya gotta keep ya head high
The rain is coming down and its pouring
But joy is gonna come inside the morning

Refrain: But we'll get by
(Bye)
We'll see the light
(Yeah)
In the morning its gonna be alright
(It's gon be ok baby)
The circumstance
(The lord got ya)
Is in the plan
(And I gotcha)
Even if we don't fully understand
Why the bad things
Happen to the good people

It was the part when Hakeem was singing “The Lord got ya...and I gotcha” that got the tears streaming down my face. Who would have thought that Empire would put out into the culture what it is that we need to be and do for each other as the body of Christ?

Which brings me to the second moment of this week – the one that happened in real life. I was invited to a party for one of our newer members, Kate Mears, who has only been around Hope Church for less than a year. (Kate gave me permission to share this with you today.) There was a moment in Kate’s life this week that needed celebrating. The kind of moment you might typically turn to your family or people who have known you forever. For a set of reasons that are complicated like so many of our lives are there really wasn’t anyone who was going to celebrate this moment with her. So some folks from Hope Church decided to throw her a party. And when my family arrived the room was already full with some 25-30 people from ages 4 to 78. There was cake, and sparkling cider, and toasts and gifts. I thought to myself – YES – this is what it looks like to be the body of Christ to each other. When someone has been walking a long journey alone, we need to come alongside and speak some encouragement. When someone hits a milestone and needs to be celebrated, we need to come along side and throw a party. There was a moment in the toasts that paralleled so beautifully this moment between Peter and Jesus on the beach. One of our elders lifted her glass and said to Kate something like “we are so glad that you can live your Christian faith among us.”

That is what Jesus did for Peter that day to remind him who he is as one who loves Jesus and is loved by Jesus. And then to issue to him the Summons that comes to us all: now feed my sheep, tend my lambs, live your faith among my people.

There is so much about this world that is good and so much that is broken - structures and systems that are animated by a spirit of fear and intimidation. Part of our work is to challenge those powers; to embody the love of Jesus - a love that is at once fiercely strong and intensely vulnerable; a love that makes us ready to be there for each other to encourage and support and to celebrate the many ways we can live our faith among God’s people. Thanks be to God that Jesus lives among us! Amen.