

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 18 APRIL 2010

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John 21: 1-19

"The Feast of Love: Intimacy Nourishing Transformation"

1. The Risen Jesus "shows himself to the disciples"

In our story in John 21: 1-19, the writer of this epilogue to John's Gospel stresses that the risen Jesus "showed himself to the disciples".

For Bruce Epperly this passage joins "mysticism with mission and resurrection with vocation...[and that Such] Spiritual experiences are intended to inspire acts of service and healing that can transform the world".^[1] By mysticism, he means encountering the living God in the meeting with the risen Christ. He calls this a God-moment, and that in this encounter we are transformed.

Mysticism or God-moments can be understood in all too narrow and small a manner. How do they happen for people today? What does he mean by spiritual experience?

When I was a teenager, my Protestant Christian community encouraged us to have such moments, shared stories of this happening. I never really had them in this way. My mother said she had them, and that we should have a faith like hers because of such spiritual experiences. Yet, she refused to do the work of examining the way she treated her "self" and the way she was so hard on us as her children, even as we grew into adulthood!

2. Effective God-moments show us to ourselves!

In this story in John 21, not only does the risen Jesus "show himself" to the disciples, but he "shows" or reveals Peter to himself in a deep and significant way. This was an encounter in which intimacy evolved and enabled transformation at many levels of his life.

Let us look at the way in which Peter is presented in our story.

We meet him as he decides to return to his fishing profession: He informs his friends, "I am going fishing." Has it become all too hard? Is he *distancing himself* from the scene of failure? From his own failure in brazenly betraying Jesus around a charcoal campfire, at the scene where he is accused of being a follower of Jesus, when Jesus has been taken prisoner? Has the cause of Jesus disappointed him?

He may be fickle, but he has the power to influence others. They all decide to go fishing with him. He is a leader!

Peter saw Jesus on the shore but did not recognise him. The beloved disciple eventually discerned that it was the risen Jesus relating to them! Spiritual experiences always carry ambiguity with them and require discernment.

As soon as Peter heard what this disciple said, he did not reflect on this but he impetuously leapt

into the water! He left his colleagues to do all the work! There is something very narcissistic and impetuous about his personality.

In Acts 10, there may have been elements of this self-orientation and impetuosity when Peter goes off on his own and meets them after he has a vision about meeting Gentiles. When he returns to report a successful meeting with Cornelius, the Jerusalem leaders ask him, "Why did you go and meet with them?" Of course, this spontaneity was what enabled him to be so experimental in his life!

Then, as they sit around a charcoal fire on the beach, and Jesus asks the disciples to bring over some of the fish they caught in their net, Peter again rushed over to do this, without any form of delegation or cooperation with his colleagues!

Finally, we have that memorable scene, after breakfast, where Jesus really engages intimately with Peter and asks him, "Do you love me?" In this event, for Peter to really see Jesus, he needs to really be shown the nature of his own self!

3. What does it mean to be shown one's own self?

Commentators reduce the event of Jesus and Peter around the question, Do you love me, to an overly spiritualised engagement, of Peter finding faith in the risen Jesus! In my interpretation, using contemporary language, Jesus is dealing holistically with Peter, including processing his avoidances and defences, his denied shame and betrayal.

As Jesus asks Peter whether he loves Jesus, Peter just blurts out positively that he does! He does this without the slightest recognition about the elephants in the room, that he said this with extreme confidence just before Jesus was arrested and yet was unable to fulfil his commitment!

Yet Jesus persists in asking whether he loves him. And only when Peter feels the hurt, is he able to release the anxiety of failure, allowing it to rise to the surface! Jesus knew that it was only when anxiety emerged, that Peter was really being honest in dealing with his defences and avoidances!

Harriet G Lerner's family systems language enables us to gain a deeper understanding of what was going on in the event. She writes that we sacrifice or lose our self when anxiety is high. Peter lowered his anxiety by *distancing* himself and denying his failure, shame and guilt, which is typical of men. The tendency of women is to *overfunction*.

[Yet distancing does not mean] "having no feelings" but *distancing is actually a way of managing very intense feelings*. It is also a de-selfed position. We are not high on the selfhood scale when we cannot stay emotionally connected to family members and speak directly to the important and difficult issues in our lives.[\[2\]](#)

Lerner shares her own family story of these movements of self in response to anxiety.[\[3\]](#) In the 1950s when she was twelve years old, her mother had serious health issues. Her elder sister *overfunctioned* to deal with her anxiety. She cooked, cleaned, ironed "with perfect competence and without complaint". Harriet *underfunctioned*, enabling her mother to manage her overwhelming anxiety by focusing on Harriet. The father distanced (a typical male pattern of managing stress).[\(29\)](#)

In the 1980s, Harriet called her mother to discuss that earlier episode in their life. Her mother reflected to her that when she was diagnosed with her condition, she had "no self"! What "she could do and give to her own children, she could not give and do" (30) for her self. At first she was fighting

80% for her Harriet, and 20% for herself.

Lerner relates powerfully: "Over time, the balance began to shift as my mother learned to value her own life and make it a priority". (30) Harriet ends her story with the sadness that their family did not have the kind of support to enable them to process her mother's condition in a more open and direct way.

4. Conclusion

In our story in John 21, Jesus provides Peter with the intimacy that enables him to process his lack of self, his distancing due to his anxiety! Without this intimate processing of his inner life, and his past failure and guilt, Peter will not be free to engage in his full and true capacity to lead his community to express the new life God has released in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

William Loader states powerfully:

Meeting the risen Jesus in the context of the meal meant facing fundamental questions... Peter's story is larger than an account of calling. It is a recycling of denial into affirmation. Three times Peter had not loved Jesus more than all else (18:25-27). The potential leader became a figure of shame as the cock crowed. ...

Here the enthusiasm is back and again Peter is out of his depth. We might think of Matthew's story of Peter's failed attempt to follow Jesus on the water. John just has Peter back in deep water, confronted again with loyalty and love in a threesome with which the ancient world typically highlighted its key texts.

Resurrection celebrates the risenness of Jesus. The appearance to Peter celebrates divine grace. The world and the church (across its history) are littered with smashed lives and vessels ground beneath vengeful, judging feet. Thus far and no further: cross the line of shame and there is no way back ... Not so the divine initiative at Easter. The veil of death is parted; through it a hand reaches out to a Peter, shamed and probably resigned to former routines. Wherever and however it happened, Peter was turned from death to life.^[4]

Yes, but divine grace is real only if it engages the unconscious where denials and guilt can fester, the inner life, the anxious self, the personal, interpersonal, communal, social, political and national realities of our everyday existence.

This includes dealing with emotional intelligence. This involves two factors:

Intrapersonal intelligence, which is the ability to understand, accept and manage oneself, and *interpersonal* intelligence, the capacity to work effectively with a wide variety of people.

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^[1] Bruce Epperly, *Easter 3, 2010, John 21. 1-19*,
<http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-04-18.shtml>

[2] Harriet G Lerner ,*The Dance of Intimacy*, 34.

[3] *Op Cit*, 28ff.

[4] William Loader, *Easter 3: 18 April John 21:1-19*,
<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkEaster3.htm>

[5] Ginger Lapid-Bogda, *Bringing out the best in everyone you coach*, xix