

WANDERING HEART: FIGURING OUT FAITH WITH PETER¹

Psalm 107:1-3,17-22 ~ Matthew 16:21-23

I'm Fixed Upon It

Fourth Sunday in Lent ~ March 10, 2024

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson

What would say that *you* are “fixed upon”? What are the things you are absolutely certain about? We know the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. (Of course, this morning, thanks to Day Light Saving’s Time, it rose an hour earlier than yesterday.) Nevertheless, we are certain, we are fixed upon, the certainty that it will rise. Yes? And what about the certainty that $2 + 2 = 4$. You have to love mathematics for that. Yes? Just one more: We know this service will not end at 10:30 A.M... Well, there’s three. Conversely, we are *not* certain about the weather. (Although it is certainly changing in alarming ways.) Nor about our health: our individual body, or our loved ones’ bodies; or of the body politic of our nation or of our world.

Given how little we can be absolutely certain about, it is curious how addicted we are to certainty. Most of us to one degree or another, are addicted to certainty. If only our faith was on that list with sunrises and arithmetic. In our gospel story today, Peter thought he was certain, about what the Messiah, should do and be. And then this happened. This hinge point conversation in the arc of Matthew’s whole gospel, Jesus’ first prediction about what was ahead for him. And it wasn’t pretty: great suffering, being killed, and on the third day be raised. Wait, what? Peter was completely thrown off, blown away, and stubbornly refused to accept what Jesus had told them would happen. *Must* happen. Jesus was certain about it.

When was the last time that you were completely blown away by a new idea or revelation from a person you thought you knew through and through? Something that turned your understanding about a person or situation completely on its head. Probably (if you were lucky) what you said or did in response was *not* recorded for others to see. Of course, these days with TikTok, and cell phones everywhere all the time—you never know. Before there was TikTok, actually since 1989 there was the show “America’s Funniest Home Videos.” And even before the show “America’s Funniest Home videos” came on the scene, there was a show called “Candid Camera.” Remember that one? It began in 1948! Hidden cameras would catch people in embarrassing or awkward moments. And the rest of us would find them highly entertaining.

If you think about it, this short, embarrassing dust up between Jesus and Peter, seems like excellent content for any of these shows. Starting from what had just happened before this, (last Sunday’s text) when Jesus affirmed Peter for his divine insight, renamed him, “Rock” or “Peter” and handed him the keys to the kingdom of heaven—then this! Jesus and Peter. Best of friends, truly. This will not be the last snarl between them. Maybe stubborn attracts stubborn. Time to get out your sea bands, folks. It’s going to get rough, as I pick up where we left off last week, at Matt. 16 verse 21.

Sermon

Who is your best friend in all the world? (Or was.) You know, "Your person." The one who really gets you. And yes, *still* loves you. Your "Besty." Your BFF. Bring that person into your mind... Take a breath and offer a silent prayer of thanks for that person, that gift of knowing them, of having them in your life, for however long or short that may be or have been... Amen. Now, I want you to think about the person in your life with whom you have had the worst arguments. The most intense misunderstandings. Conversations, arguments, let's just say it, fights. Dust ups you hope to God were *not* recorded by any device...who comes to mind? Funny thing: I am willing to bet that you thought of that very same person.

In the musical, "My Fair Lady" there is a song that Henry Higgins' sings – "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" Higgins is provoked, irked by Eliza Doolittle who is rocking his little world. He took her on as a project, on a bet with his friend, Pickering, that by simply changing the way she talks, he could pass her off as a high born woman. But he is starting to have feelings for her: a woman who is extremely different than he. Not only that, she her own opinions. Nor does she always do what he wants. In this song, he expresses his absolute frustration and confusion. Which is not really at the root of it about gender differences. Higgins' mind was fixed on so many things. But then along comes Eliza. In the second verse, he goes on to ask Pickering, "Why can't a woman be more like *you*?" The song then drives to the heart of what he is feeling in the final line: "Why can't a woman be more like *me*?"

Although we may *wish* that our best friend thought, felt, and acted just us, we don't really want that, do we? We look for a best friend, a partner, a spouse who "gets us" that is really understands and likes us, yet is "*not us*," right? That's what keeps the spark alive, the fire of passion burning brightly. I am not sure whether we should delve too far into your relationship with "Alexa" or "Siri" they are so very compliant... But AI is offering up something more. You may have heard that an increasing number of people are forming friendships and romantic relationships with AI chatbots. Created for this purpose! Now you can create a companion that will *always* tilt toward agreeing with you. All the time. A companion who is there whenever you want them. Someone always ready to listen. And take your side. Unless you program them otherwise. You are in complete control. Thanks to AI, you *can* have your best friend and romantic partner be another you. That may feel really good. For a while. But will this kind of one way, conflict-free relationship help you grow into the fullness of the person God has created you to be?

Our Bible tells and teaches us otherwise. From the stories of our matriarchs and patriarchs: like Jacob wrestling at Peniel with a man who turned out to be an angel, a mystical personage of God. Talk about stubborn! Yet out of that all night wrestling match, Jacob's identity was forged as leader of God's chosen people. God renamed him, "Israel" which in Hebrew actually means "struggle." What do we see here from Jacob to Peter to us? Growing in our faith is *not* about locking down our world into a set of certainties, except one: stubbornly holding onto the steadfast unchanging love of God. When we do that, we will be tested as never before. And through this testing, we will continue to grow, day by day. We will be called out, like Peter was by Jesus, when Peter was resisting God's way. Aside from not wanting his best friend and

teacher to suffer and die, there was something else. What Jesus was telling him did not square with his understanding of who the Messiah would be or do.

You may not realize from our Christian perspective, 2000 years later, that Peter's resistance and pushback at the time was completely understandable. Jesus' prediction of his great suffering, being killed and raised: was a radically different endgame than the one Peter, or any Jewish people were imagining. This is not what was supposed to happen to their long-expected Messiah. Their vision involved a warrior's sword, not a servant's towel. "There's no foot washing in the world of the empire building Messiah." There was *nothing* in the Hebrew Scriptures that referred to a suffering Messiah, nor one that should suffer a shameful death. It was actually the very opposite: the Messiah was expected *to inflict* suffering and death on Israel's enemies and on the wicked within Israel, not to experience it himself.ⁱⁱ

No one likes to be wrong or have their ideas about God or about another person or group of people challenged. And yet, what I hear in this story today, about Peter and Jesus' dust up is this: If you want your spirit to grow this Lent; if you want a relationship you are struggling with to get unstuck and go to a deeper level of understanding: Lean into that struggle. Don't resist it. The same holds true with struggles between groups of people. Political differences, cultural differences, you name it. Best friends deepen their relationships; Church communities find the way of Divine Love to which God is calling them, not by avoiding conflicts or pretending to agree and shutting down. But by working through those struggles, conflicts, and misunderstandings together, in the light of God's redeeming grace. I will confess: This is an especially hard lesson for me. God gave me a personality that leads with agreeing, compromise, fitting in, seeing the bright and best side. (That is not a big revelation to those who know me 😊)

Beloved Community: What are you "fixed upon"? Is it God's unchanging love? Or is it a certain way of believing about God. If it is really all about God's unchanging love; if Jesus is teaching about a way of life that culminates in a call to love as God loves, with non-discriminatory love that includes even the enemy, we are getting closer to "the way" of to which Jesus is calling us. A way that may require us to let go of certain ideas that we cling to. When Paul tries to summarize what God requires and desires, he does not say: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall have the correct beliefs."" He declares, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Galatians 5:14). This is a point that Brian D. McLaren makes in his book titled *Faith after Doubt*. He goes on from this point to one that can help us rethink the differences even between religions.

He writes: "We're used to thinking of the real differences in the world as among religions: you are Buddhist, I am Christian, she is Jewish, he is atheist. But I wonder if that way of thinking is becoming irrelevant and perhaps even counter-productive. What if the deeper question is not whether you are a Christian, Buddhist, or atheist, but rather what kind of Christian, Buddhist, or atheist are you? Are you a believer who puts your distinct beliefs first, or are you a person of faith who puts love first? Are you a believer whose beliefs put you in competition and conflict

with people of differing beliefs, or are you a person of faith whose faith moves you toward the other with love?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Are you fixed upon the mount of God's unchanging love, God's amazing grace upon grace made known to us through Christ? Or is it something or someone else? I will close with the prayer titled, "Catch Me in My Scurrying"^{iv} by Ted Loeder. May this prayer help you to fix your heart on God's unchanging love, as you deepen your friendship with Christ. Let us pray:

*Catch me in my anxious scurrying, Lord,
and hold me in this Lenten season:
hold my feet to the fire of your grace
and make me attentive to my mortality
that I may begin to die now
to those things that keep me
from living with you
and with my neighbors on this earth;
to grudges and indifference,
to certainties that smother possibilities,
to my fascination with false securities,
to my addiction to sweatless dreams,
to my arrogant insistence on how it has to be;
to my corrosive fear of dying someday
which eats away the wonder of living this day,
and the adventure of losing my life
in order to find it in you...*

*Catch me in my mindless scurrying, Lord,
and hold me in this Lenten season:
hold my spirit to the beacon of your grace
and grant me light enough to walk boldly,
to feel passionately,
to love aggressively;*

*grant me peace enough to want more,
to work for more
and to submit to nothing less,
and to fear only you...
only you!*

*Bequeath me not becalmed seas,
slack sails and premature benedictions,
but breathe into me a torment,
storm enough to make within myself
and from myself,
something...*

*something new,
something saving,
something true,
a gladness of heart,
a pitch for a song in the storm,
a word of praise lived,
a gratitude shared,
a cross dared,
a joy received.*

Amen.

ⁱ A Sanctified Art LLC/ sanctifiedart.org Lenten Theme 2024 Series.

ⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Matthew* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1992) p.194.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What To Do About It*, (St. Martin's: New York, NY, 2021), p. 127.

^{iv} Ted Loeder, "Catch Me in My Scuffling," *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (Lura Media: San Diego, CA, 1984), p.117-119. (Excerpts.)