

The Inclusive Community

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 21, 2010

Reconciliation

Psalm 139:1-12 – John 21: 1-19

Homily of Rev. Dr. George McDonald

My parents called me Simon -- Simon, son of John. Jesus called me Rocky. You remember, "You are Rocky, and upon this rock I will build my kingdom." This, my friends, is the Rocky Johnson story.

It all started the evening before Jesus died, when we celebrated the Passover together. I wish I could forget that night. I'm sure I never will!

I knew it was going to be bad shortly after we gathered in that upper room. Jesus took off his outer robe and began to wash our feet. I told him I wouldn't let him wash my feet because he was my teacher. He snapped back, "Don't hassle me, Rocky. My way, or the highway. It's your call. Decide!" It was an offer I couldn't refuse!

Then, he asked John to sit at his right hand. I should have had that place of honor! After all, I was his best friend. And none of them ever walked on water! But Jesus asked John to sit at his right hand.

During dinner, Jesus took the matzoh, said it was his body, broken for us. We didn't understand that, but he'd been talking kind of funny ever since we were in Caesarea Philippi, where he asked us who people said he was, and I said he was the Messiah. He told us to eat the bread. We ate it.

Then he took the cup of wine we symbolically prepare for Elijah, who was to come before the Messiah. Jesus said it was the cup of the new covenant poured out in his blood. He insisted we all drink it. We didn't understand, but we drank.

He said he was going to die. He said we would all abandon him. I jumped to my feet. "Not me, Jesus! I'm ready to die with you!" He turned, and with those dark, deep-sunk eyes of his, looked right through me, "Rocky, before the rooster crows tomorrow, you will deny that you ever knew me - three times!"

He had to be wrong! I was Rocky, the Rock. But before I could protest that he had misjudged me, he was already out the door.

It went from bad to worse. The rest of that night was hell! Of course, in spite of all my grandiose blustering, I came off in my best wishy-washy style. We went to Gethsemane. Jesus asked us to pray with him. I went to sleep.

Judas came with some soldiers to arrest Jesus. I pulled out my sword -- to protect him, but he told me to stop. I ran and hid. But I followed in the shadows, to the high priest's house. I mingled with those huddled around the fire outside.

One of the serving girls looked at me, "You were with him!" "No I wasn't!"

Later someone else pointed at me, "That big guy there, he's one of them, too." I protested, "You're crazy!"

Later someone else picked up on my accent and insisted, "Listen to that guy talk. Obviously, he's from Galilee. He must have been with Jesus!"

I was going to shout him down. But before the words even came out of my mouth, the cock crowed and they brought Jesus out of the house. I stood there in the firelight. He looked right at me. A cold chill ran up my back. He knew. He had known all along! I don't know how, but he knew.

I tried to cover my face in shame. I burst into tears! I ran out of the court yard. I ran and ran and ran! I cried and cried and cried! How could I ever face the others? How could I possibly live with myself? I just wanted God to strike me dead and get it over with!

All day Friday, I told myself I needed to hide from the Roman soldiers and the Jewish authorities. I was really trying to hide from God - and from myself!

Friday night, I finally made my way back to that room where we had celebrated the Passover feast. Everyone except Judas and Thomas was there! The others wanted me to tell them what to do. I just wanted to be left alone.

We hid there in that room, afraid that they, whoever they were, would come to get us, too. Some of the women had followed Jesus to Golgotha and watched him die. They returned and told their story of what had happened, again and again, whenever another of Jesus' distraught followers came in. They told us how a member of the council, Joseph of Arimathea, had asked for permission to bury Jesus' body in his own tomb.

Sunday morning, a few women went to the tomb to anoint the body and wrap it in a burial shroud. They returned and breathlessly told us the tomb was empty and Jesus had appeared to them.

That was it! I'd had it! I didn't need such hysterical nonsense! I had followed Jesus for three years. And what did I have to show for it? Our dreams had been shattered. Now I had nothing. So I went home, back to Bethsaida, on the Sea of Galilee. A few of the other fishermen went with me. We did the only thing we knew how to do. We fished all night long and got nothing but tired!

As morning dawned, a man appeared on the shore. "How'd you do?" Dejectedly, we answered, "Not a thing."

"Well then, why not cast the net to the right side of the boat?" Half-heartedly, we did, and the net was so full, we couldn't haul it in. Something in my head clicked. That's the way I met Jesus the first time, when he called me to follow him, and said he would make us fishers of people. It was Jesus, again, on the shore! I jumped into the water, and splashed my way through the surf toward him. Jesus had fish and bread for us to eat.

However, there was still one problem. I rejoiced to be in Jesus' presence. But I could not look him in the eye! That courtyard rooster - I could still hear it. I couldn't stop the sound. And every time I heard the rooster, I heard myself saying, "Woman, I don't know him!" "Man, I don't know what you are talking about!" "I am not one of his followers!" I hated myself! "Three times you will deny me, Rocky," he said. And, sure enough, three times I did.

After we had eaten, Jesus asked me to walk down the beach with him, while the others washed and repaired the nets. He looked straight ahead and asked, "Simon," [He didn't call me Rocky. He called me Simon.] "Do you love me more than these?" I answered him "You know that I love you." He told me to feed his lambs.

Again he asked, "Simon, do you love me?" I said, "Yes. You know I love you." "Tend my sheep."

He stopped, turned, looked at me, and asked a third time, "Simon Johnson, do you love me?" I was crushed! Why didn't he believe me? Why did he ask me that third time? But I looked him straight in the eye and he said to him, "Jesus, you know everything; you know that I love you." He replied, "Feed my sheep."

Three times I denied Jesus. But three times Jesus the Christ asked me to affirm our relationship; three times he gave me my orders.

I don't know if it was a dream, a hallucination, a revelation, or a what. But something real happened to me, and somehow I received it as a gift from God. I began to see my life in a new totally way.

When I was separated from Jesus, from others, and from myself, then in another sense, God was separated from me. Now I realize that there is something in the universe that doesn't accept separation very well. Even the separation we call death is never the final word!

It was as though Jesus came back from the dead to overcome my separation. I won't even try to explain it, but somehow, I was reunited to God, to others, and to myself. So I looked Jesus straight in the eye, [Did you get that? I was able to look Jesus in the eye!] and I said, "Lord, you know I love you." In that moment, I was at one with all of creation, and with myself, because I was reconciled to God. Again, I don't understand it, but I trust that this Oneness will never end. My friend Paul later put it this way: For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.