

John 18:1-27

In a sense, the Fourth gospel can be read as the story of the inner struggle and ultimately the confession of one named Simon, nicknamed Peter. Again and again, this gospel circles back to this pivotal figure. He came close to leaving Jesus in the episode of the feeding of the multitude. We looked at his dis-ease when Jesus assumed the mantle of the servant and tried to wash his feet. Now, Peter is portrayed as a major figure in the drama of the passion. He will continue to be central when this gospel writer begins to tell the story of the resurrection.

As we previously noted, all the characters in this gospel have been assigned symbolic roles. Judas stands for those who cannot move from darkness to light, from death to life. If that is true, then Simon Peter must symbolize those in whom the struggle between darkness and light is the most intense, and in whom the ultimate outcome is in doubt until the very end.

Simon Peter was first introduced in the Fourth Gospel simply as “the brother of Andrew,” who acts as his gatekeeper. Andrew’s first response to his experience of Jesus is to find his brother, announce to him that in Jesus the messiah has appeared and then bring him to Jesus. The resulting confrontation of Jesus with Simon Peter gives us a glimpse of what lies ahead, but it also makes it clear that John is not writing history but a gospel of signs and symbols. “So you are Simon,” Jesus says, “but your destiny is to become as firm as a rock” which translates to Peter. I am not so interested in who you are now, says Jesus, but in what you are

destined to become: a rocklike person of resolution and strength.

That transition would not come easily. John was signalling in this exchange that the struggle to be born into a new consciousness, a new being, a new source of what it means to be fully human, would be fought out most extensively in the soul of Simon Peter. We need to recognize that Peter's struggle is in fact every person's struggle. He had been born of the flesh years earlier. His ability to be born of the spirit would test everything his life seemed to mean and it would be an intensely difficult labour.

Now Peter and the other disciples thought of God as a being. That is the way the Gospel of John is traditionally but incorrectly read. However, as explained when we started our journey through the Fourth Gospel, this book is greatly shaped by Jewish mysticism. So when Peter says, "We have believed and have come to know that you are the holy one of God," this can also be a reference to a new dimension of life, something beyond the boundaries of our fear, where self-consciousness passes into universal consciousness and in which oneness is experienced. The boundary between being self-conscious and entering a universal consciousness is both genuine and real. Jesus could not be contained inside the boundary of mere self-consciousness and neither ultimately could the disciples, nor their composite representative, Peter, if he came to embrace what Jesus meant.

When they came across the man born blind, which we read a couple of weeks ago, they wanted to know what caused the blindness or who sinned. Was it

something his parents did? Was it something he did? No, says Jesus, once again driving them beyond shallow literalism to the heart of the meaning of life; this blindness is to enable you to see God as light in this blind man. "I am light," he continues, once again using God's "I AM" name; you must leave the darkness to come to where I am. I am the door through which you must walk. I am the good shepherd who calls you. I and the Father are one.

Jesus' words keep cascading against the defences of the disciples. The inner conflict is intense, but they do not turn away. In the final sign portrayed in John, the disciples are portrayed as seeing life come out of death in the story of the raising of Lazarus. Some of the authorities, as a direct result of Lazarus' restoration, move to kill Jesus. The threat to their world view and to their security is just too great. Judas is still in the group at this time. The disciples are portrayed as still squirming, still fighting, still doubting. Jesus lays down the final challenge: "I am resurrection," he says; "I am life." The world cannot see. They have turned away. They will kill the bringer of life and light. The disciples will linger a while longer in the frightening land of indecision.

Then Jesus spoke intensely only to the disciples, enabling them to choose light over darkness, life over death, expanded humanity over the fearful and warped life that hides behind the defensive walls of human insecurity. Eventually Peter moves out of the disciple band and stands alone and individualized. This is when the offer for Jesus to become his servant and to wash his feet takes place. Peter, as we saw last week, is caught in emotions he cannot fathom. Then Jesus is portrayed as

speaking to him again, calling him beyond his ego, his pretenses, and offering him the freedom to give his life away. God is to be found in the human capacity to give, the human capacity to love. Peter is unable to hear. You will understand this someday, Peter, Jesus says. That day will come, we discover, when he stares at the picture of vulnerability and powerlessness hanging on the cross.

Peter is not yet ready to go there. He trembles on the edge for a very long time in this gospel, but he always – finally – seems to make the right decision; he never closes the door on this new possibility. On the other hand, neither is he yet willing to embrace it *fully*. Jesus has told Peter and the others: “I am the way,” come and dwell in me: “I am the life,” come and live in me: “I am the truth,” come and partake of me: “I am the vine,” come and abide in me.

All of this depicts little more than the drama that unfolds inside the life of Peter, who – like all of us – must die to what he is before he can become what he is capable of being. Peter is Everyman and Everywoman. His struggle is our struggle. Now, John says to us, his readers, we are ready to watch the story of the cross as it plays out inside Peter.

Jesus is arrested in the garden. He goes to his captors willingly, and asks that his disciples be set free. Peter, however, does not choose to depart or to flee. Instead, he is pictured as being drawn like a magnet to the power that Jesus seems to reveal. He draws his sword to defend Jesus and strikes the slave of the high priest, cutting off the man’s ear. He will be true to his word. He will die for Jesus.

Jesus orders him to put his sword away. Life is never found in a physical struggle to preserve it.

Then, through the influence of another disciple (who is not named), Peter gains access to the court of the high priest. There Peter is routed by a maid. “Are you not also one of this man’s disciples?” she asks. “I am not,” Peter responds. Survival has trumped loyalty! Peter then watches Jesus be struck by an officer of the high priest for what the officer deemed to have been an insubordinate response. The pain must have been felt as if it were his own. The scene then shifts back to where Peter is warming himself by the fire. Someone in the crowd picks up the maid’s attack: “Are you not one of his disciples?” “I am not,” Peter responds a second time. The inescapable daggers of human words are all around him. Still another picks up the accusation that is relentless when one seeks to cover one’s soul with lies. “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” this new voice inquires. Peter denies again. Bravado is demolished. The crow of the cock is heard. They take Jesus away. Peter enters the dark night of his soul.

Peter wants to *become*. He does not know how to be, how to live fully. Peter also wants to survive. That is the deepest drive present in *every* living thing. In self-conscious human life, the drive to survive locks each of us into the prison of self-centeredness. If survival is our highest value, we organize our lives to meet that ultimate need and we will do anything it takes to accomplish that final goal. We brag to hide our fear. We lie to cover our inadequacy. We push others down to elevate ourselves. We give to no one – except – insofar as our giving serves our survival

needs. We love no one more than we love ourselves. Our life is bound by our security walls, by our defence barriers. To lay those barriers down is to shake with survival-driven anxiety. We must hide to avoid the vulnerability that love requires. We must cultivate an image, a public persona, but we never find the courage to be who we are. That is what is going on in Peter. That is also the nature of every human life. That is who I am, that is who you are – survival-driven creatures, unable to enter into the fullness of our humanity.

The story of the cross is the story of Peter confronting the “word of God.” It is the word which says that we are part of that which is limitless. It is the word which invites us to come to him and to find rest from the struggle of becoming. It is the word which says we are part of who God is and God is part of who we are. It is the word which proclaims that the life of God is found in our living, the love of God is found in our loving and the being of God is found in our being.

John in this gospel is asserting that this word is made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. This does not mean that the external theistic deity comes out of the sky and enters the human Jesus in some incarnational way. It means rather that Jesus reveals in his life the freedom to live and in that living not to be at the mercy of every distorting force in life. It means that in Jesus there is a refusal to hide personal identity inside the security of tribal identity. It means that each of us can step outside the prejudices of our cultural roots, which serve to give us a sense of superiority that we think gives us a survival edge.

It means that we can refuse to live inside the boundaries of a religious system that tells us that if we practice the things which our religion requires, we can win the favour of the one who has the power to guarantee our survival. It means that the drive to survive can no longer distort our humanity, nor can it compromise our existence. It means that the life of God lives in us. It means that the love of God flows through us. It means that no one is placed beyond the boundaries of that love. It means that, like Jesus, we are free to give our life away and that *this* is what the experience of God is ultimately all about. That is John's understanding of the mystical reality that is met in Jesus.

Peter wrestles with this. He fights, he denies, he flees, but he does not remain in the darkness as Judas did. He finally escapes. Eventually he moves beyond the human to see the meaning of Jesus, where the human and the divine are seen to flow together into oneness – but it takes the cross for him to reach that point.

Peter believed that the Messiah he had been following was a man of power, someone who would liberate Israel, someone who would force the Romans to withdraw and renew the dignity of his people. Hadn't Jesus raised Lazarus from death? Wasn't he the victorious King, the great One, the "One who was to come?" That was Peter's idea of the Messiah, his ideology. That is what he wanted and expected for himself, since Jesus had chosen him to be with him and share in this same wondrous power.

Now Jesus has lost all power. He is bound in ropes, dragged away, to be tried

like a criminal. He accepts his powerlessness. Silent, he refuses to speak to defend himself! Why doesn't he defend himself? Peter cannot stand it. How can the Messiah be weak? Peter feels cheated, angry, and upset. He is plunged into a terrible disappointment and feelings of despair. He could not accept Jesus, powerless, washing his feet. He does not want to be a disciple of this weak Jesus, a weak Messiah! He is not just denying Jesus, but denying also all that he had seen, all that he had heard and all that he had lived during those years with him. He is denying his own self, and his own experience!

No wonder that Peter denied knowing this Jesus who had confused and disappointed him. That is why he has lost his identity. That is why he still had to work on *becoming* - becoming, living fully, and growing into the rock, the stable, strong disciple and leader that Jesus saw in him.

We all struggle to understand the meaning of Jesus – where the human and divine flow together into oneness – where the life of God lives in us – where the love of God flows through us – and where no one - not a single child of God is placed beyond the boundaries of that love. We need to not forget that our failures are never final. Jesus looked at Peter and saw his future, not his failures, and that is the way Jesus looks at us.

Amen.