

Contemplating the holes

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Barbara Ballenger

Once there was a boy who had a terrible temper. He would explode into incredible rages that not even a time out could reverse. So his mother decided to address the problem using a hammer and a box of nails. “Every time you lose your temper,” she said, “instead of taking it out on me, go to the backyard and pound a nail into the fence.”

The first day he pounded in 37 nails. But each day he hammered in fewer and fewer of them as he learned to control his temper.

Finally he got to the day where he hammered no nails into the fence. So his mother suggested that for each whole day he went without losing control of his temper he should pull a nail out of the fence. After many days the fence was empty. The boy had developed a nice mindfulness practice. He could keep his temper under control very well.

When he announced to his mother that his problem was now fixed, she took him by the hand and led him to backyard where they surveyed his handiwork and she said: “ Now each day, I would you like you spend some contemplating the holes that you left in my fence.”

Last Sunday the risen Jesus invited Thomas and the other 10 apostles to contemplate the holes that had been left in the divine flesh. And it was in that recognition of the wounds that remained in Jesus’ risen body, and what reconciling them entailed, that Thomas understood who Jesus truly was, and who Thomas truly was.

In our readings this week, the risen Christ works similar transformations in two of the men who would become the pillars of the Jesus movement – Peter and Paul. Peter, the rock on which Jesus built his church. And Paul the architect.

Up to the point where they encounter the post-Easter Jesus in these stories, Peter and Paul struggle with a particular sin – pride, also called arrogance. And these men, each in his own way, had to acknowledge the holes that their prideful actions left in the divine flesh, in order to understand what the rest of their lives would entail.

Let’s take Paul first. Paul was an incredibly righteous and devout son of Israel. He was so convinced of his interpretation of the Law that he saw the Jesus movement as an abomination and set out to crush it. It was a family dispute. Remember that at this time the early church was still a sect of the people of Israel. Paul was convinced of his rightness to the point of violence. State-sponsored crucifixion served his agenda very well.

But Paul was a man who paid attention to his visions. And after he saw the risen Christ, visions were all he would have to see with for three days as he was led blind, right into the hands of his enemies. And here Paul should have been very afraid, if they were anything like him. And like him, they did listen to their visions. But unlike him, they did not respond with violence, though Ananias was clearly not happy to have Paul delivered into his hands by the Lord. But he obeyed, and prayed laid hands on Paul, who

received new sight and new faith, and Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized and his life started all over again.

That's what happened when Paul contemplated the holes, when faced with the question, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? The experience humbled him.

There is a difference between humiliation and humility. Just as there is a difference between pride and dignity. Just as there is a difference between crucifixion and the cross. And these are all related.

Let's look at Peter.

In today's passage from John, he and a select group of apostles had gone back to their fishing boats. Scholars think that this is probably a later addition to the story, since Peter and Thomas and the others all act like Jesus hadn't already visited them, shown them his wounds and breathed the Holy Spirit on them. Or maybe it's just an illustration of how hard Jesus has to work, even after the resurrection.

Whatever the reason Peter isn't on his game. He didn't recognize the miracle of the fish bursting his nets, or the man making breakfast on the shore. It was the beloved disciple who did. And then Peter put on his clothes, and dove right into the water to be the first one to get to Jesus, which maybe indicates how disoriented he was by the events of the previous week.

What follows is such a beautiful and gentle example of how Jesus reconciles, where the words "I forgive you" aren't even spoken, and the details of Peter's failure aren't recounted. But we know what this is about.

"Simon, son of John do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks at first. You can hear this question two ways: Simon, do you love me more than you love these guys? Which wouldn't have been too hard. Jesus was probably saying, "do you love me more than these guys love me?"

And that's a trick question. Because the old Peter, the pre-Easter Peter would have said, Jesus, I absolutely love you more than anyone else does. I would never betray you. I would defend you with a sword. I would lay down my life for you so you wouldn't have to die. Peter was convinced of his rightness to the point of violence. State-sponsored crucifixion threatened all he believed in.

But Biblical Scholar Raymond Brown suggests that the post-Easter Peter had been humbled by his experience of having denied Jesus three times.¹ He knew better than to say he was greatest among them. "You know I love you," he tells Jesus. Again, Jesus asks, and again Peter answers. You know.

But when Jesus asks the third time, it starts to sting. I wonder if Peter is getting a bit scared. Maybe Jesus doesn't believe him. Maybe Peter's love isn't enough. The holes in Jesus' flesh are very convicting.

But Jesus is doing something more than undoing the effects of Peter's three-fold denial. He is taking him back to the very beginning of his ministry with Jesus. To the moment when Jesus changed his name from Simon to Cephas, and asked him to follow him. With Jesus' words, feed my sheep, feed my lambs, Peter's life as an apostle started all over again. With one addition: the cross.

¹ Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year: Raymond E. Brown, SS (1928-1998) Expanded Edition with Essays by John R. Donahue, SJ, and Ronald D. Witherup, SS. Liturgical Press. Kindle Edition. (location 4967)

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go,” Jesus tells Peter, referring to how he will die.

It’s not unlike what Jesus says about Paul: “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Both of these men will be killed as a result of these encounters with the risen Christ, but both go toward that reality with a sense of victory and purpose. That’s what it means for Jesus’ followers to carry the cross after Easter, it’s to live unafraid of their enemies. It is a sign of God’s victory.

There is a difference between humiliation and humility. Just as there is a difference between arrogant pride and dignity. Just as there is a difference between crucifixion and the cross. And these are all related.

Humiliation is a lowliness that is forced upon another; it is an act of shaming that keeps someone in their place, keeps them from rising. It is the chief tool that the prideful and the arrogant use to keep their power in place, the supreme flex, to strip someone of their dignity. Crucifixion was the ultimate act of violent humiliation and shaming and degradation of another.

Humility is something that is chosen. It is an act of sacrifice for the sake of others, a generous outpouring of self that empowers others. Humility runs on gratitude; it appreciates its dependence and its need for others. And in that it rises in dignity, because it can’t be shamed by its lowliness.

To privilege humiliation, arrogance, and crucifixion as a way of life, is to put oneself outside of the path of God’s redemption. And I’m not talking about other people here, but my own tendencies toward these things. Humiliation? Just ask my kids about my parenting failures. Arrogance? The Lord has given me a well-trained tongue and God help you when I don’t manage to use it for good. Crucifixion? How many times has my fear of backlash or potential discomfort kept me from challenging the tortuous structures upon which so many bodies are nailed?

But these stories today of Paul and Peter put me in good company at least. They show me how Jesus undoes the **power** of sin – in them, in me, in us all.

When the risen Christ asked Paul and Peter those stinging questions: Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? Simon, son of John, do you love me? He was inviting them to choose humility over humiliation. To choose dignity over arrogant pride. To embrace the power of the cross over complicity with crucifixion.

Those questions were an act of divine love.

The wounds that remain in the body of the risen Christ are a constant reminder of the divine love that fueled the lives of Paul and Peter from that day forward. They are a constant reminder of the divine love that fuels our lives as Christ’s followers as well.

The invitation of Easter is for us to walk in the way of that love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Amen.