

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
April 15, 2018 – Easter 3
Acts 3:12-19 Luke 24:36b-48

How often do we hear, and say ourselves say - “If I only knew then what I know now” Why do we say this!? Is a way of saying, “I’ve grown in wisdom as I’ve aged?” Pretty obvious. But that’s not how that expression usually is used. Usually it has to do with regret. When we look back on our former self, often we cringe. We stand in judgment of our former self. We roundly condemn our former selves. And a cycle of inner criticism continues. And in this way, we keep centred on ourselves. Who needs a judgmental God when we are such fierce judges of our own selves? Past and present? What’s the way out of this regret and criticism? Our readings today tell us.

In our first reading this morning from the Acts of the Apostles, we come upon a crowd that has gathered around the temple gate just having witnessed the disciples Peter and John heal a crippled man. Standing there gawking and puzzling over the miracle they have just seen performed, Peter addresses them, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” He goes on to chastise them saying something like: “You killed the author of life – we are witnesses to your death-making actions , and now you are witnesses how His power working through us *gives life.*” And after this harsh but accurate accusation, Peter says..... “And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.... Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.” And here we

have it, the life-giving and life-serving instruction. Once you become aware of how your life is not in alignment with the Divine, turn your hearts towards God, repent, return to love. Peter has called the people who convicted and murdered Jesus “friends” because he understands that they acted out of ignorance. They did not know what they have the opportunity of learning now. Having witnessed a miracle being worked right in front of them, he gives the hopeful message that those who have been involved in death and darkness can still turn to life and the light.

In other words, as your eyes are opened, and you see the consequences of your actions, don't get caught up self-judgment. Own up to your ignorance and turn to God who forgives all, and let your heart and mind be freed up to serve life and the author of life.

I met a man in William Head prison 20 years ago when I was sharing my work in Nonviolent Communication. Of course I was not privy to what crime Larry had committed to end up in prison. All I knew that, like many of the others in the class, he was *really* motivated to learn a new way of expressing himself and dealing with his emotions. Like many, I knew Larry grew up in family where violence and neglect were the norm. He had never had time for friends because he was treated like a slave on the farm his parents ran, working long hours before and after school. Larry had gained substantial skill in communicating effectively by the time I ran into him. He had been learning how to take responsibility for his emotions and behaviour for years, and practising how to communicate in ways others would respond favourably to.

During the course of our conversations over coffee, Larry learned that my father, as governor in rural Indonesia, had been in charge of several prisons and had tried out some innovative reforms there in the late 1940's. Larry asked to correspond with my father. It was agreed that he could and the two became somewhat of pen pals. Years after my father died, I came across the letters Larry had written him. In one, Larry told his story. Larry had murdered three women in his much younger years. At the time of writing, he was coming to the end of his 25-year life sentence and wrote, "I am not a murderer. I am no longer that angry young man who killed those women. I'm a different person now." I cried when I read that. Because it was true, when I met Larry, he was a good person. A bit awkward, but what would you imagine after all those years locked up behind bars?

"And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance...." Peter tells us.

What have *we* done in ignorance that we need to let go of; that we need to repent of? That we need to offer up to God?

When I asked myself that question preparing this sermon, a seemingly small incident comes to mind that makes me cringe internally.

It was 24 years ago or so, we were visiting with my sister's family. My brother-in-law came to tell me that the toilet was stopped up. Had anyone in my family put something down it that shouldn't have been flushed? I asked our two sons, 5 and 9 years old. "No," they both asserted. Well my brother-in-law spent a good part of the afternoon working on the toilet. Finally, the problem was discovered

– a partially eaten apple. He came to show me. I was mortified. I was a bad parent. I confronted the boys again. Both denied doing it but I noticed the older one flushed as he spoke. So I went after him pulling out the biggest weapon I had - “God knows everything you do, so just fess up.” This was my warped way of spreading the good news. That God knows our hearts. Except I was using it as a threat not the profound reassurance that it is.

He just started crying uncontrollably. And I realized I had been more concerned with my own parenting than with my son; helping him learn from experience and make good.

Well, that is one of those experiences that taught me, a brand new Christian, never to use God as a weapon. Ever. It gave me a taste of how terribly wrong Christianity can go, and has gone, throughout the ages.

And so when I hear Peter’s words “I know you acted in ignorance, Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” I find great solace in that. Through grace, I am not the person I was back then. And as letter from 1st John said today, “Beloved, we are God’s children now.” Children make mistakes and need to learn from their elders.

We are loved, we are forgiven, through Jesus we have been freed to learn and grow from our mistakes so that we can become more loving, more caring, more compassionate and more concerned with others than with our own sins.

Each week we listen to Scripture to inspire us, to guide us, to support us. We are reminded over and over again to get over

ourselves - to let God clean out our dark spaces in order to let the divine light shine through us. We are not to cling to the past precisely because we are not our past. We are God's children. Being a child in the divine sense means we can always rely on God to help us learn and grow.

I want to end with the words of Bishop Spong, and I encourage you to include yourselves in the people he speaks about -
"Go to all the world, go beyond the boundaries of your fears. Go to those you have defined as unclean, unworthy, unsaved, uncircumcised and unbaptized. Go to those you have reduced to being the object of your prejudices. Go to those who are different. Go to the rejected of the world and teach them what I have taught you, namely that God is love and that love embraces all that God has made, that love has no boundaries, that love rejects no one and that love is the essence of the gospel. The Great Commission was never meant to be a charge to us to convert the heathen, as it has so often been interpreted to be. It was and is a call to see everyone as living inside the love of God. "

We are not the people we once we were; so let's be compassionate with our ignorance, our mistakes because God is. And at the table of forgiveness this morning, we can repent and find new life.

Thanks be to God, Alleluja!