

FINDING OUR PURPOSE

Matthew 26: 31-35; 69-75; John 21: 15-19

It was one of the most moving events of our recent history as Canadians: hosting the Invictus Games here in Toronto. Athletes from all over the world, representing many countries... athletes with disability stemming from injury during service as soldiers... all here to compete and to find renewed healing on their life journey. Of course, as many of us know, the healing is not just a physical thing. Far beyond the physical ability to compete, to find direction, purpose and focus as athletes, healing is a deeply spiritual thing. Why spiritual? Because the wounds go far deeper than the physical damage.

Chaplain David Wells was one of a team of chaplains representing various faith traditions, working with athletes throughout the games. In an interview he speaks about how things that can fill most of us with joy and excitement can become triggers for those struggling with inner demons. There's survivor guilt – “why did I live, and my fellow soldier and friend did not?” There's feelings of shame – “I could have done something more to save him, I was scared and didn't perform as I should have, I saw things I cannot put out of my mind.” There's anger at God and at whoever is deemed responsible. There's a loss of identity and purpose – “So much of who I am is being a soldier and now I cannot be one.” These things and more fuel feelings of torment which can trigger flashbacks when all the sights, cheers and excitement are in full swing. “How can I be happy and celebrate when those I left behind are not here...” “Who am I? Why am I even here?” Wells knows there are no answers. But being there to offer a listening ear... Being there to offer a prayer or worship at critical moments before and after a competition... It can make all the difference...

The work of Chaplain David Wells was also being done by a pastor and theologian living a whole generation ago named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But Bonhoeffer's situation was even more critical. He was a chaplain and a prisoner himself. He was sharing a jail cell with other soldiers and civilians, arrested for participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot failed and now Bonhoeffer was awaiting trial and probable execution for treason. Even though those around Bonhoeffer found him courageous and strong, his journal at the time reveals a man shaken and full of questioning. His best-known journal entry is a poem he wrote, entitled “Who am I?”

“Who am I?

They often tell me I stepped from my cell's confinement

Calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I?

They also tell me I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
Tossing in expectations of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine..."

The poem goes on a little further... but before we get there let's pause for a moment and reflect on the kind of inner experience Bonhoeffer is pointing to. Like many caught in extraordinary situations, feelings of inadequacy and failure torment the soul even as everything can seem fine on the outside. To live this kind of double life is hard. Bonhoeffer, like many Invictus Games athletes, like many veterans and soldiers, lived this torment. He had to find some positive way to work through it all so that resurrection into new life could come. But for new life to come, the journey through the darkness was and is critical. What kind of spiritual support is needed for the journey out of darkness?

Let's ponder our scripture readings ... All three readings focus on Peter. Peter is supposed to be the head disciple. His original name is Simon. He's given the new name Peter because it means 'rock.' Peter is supposed to be the rock for all the other disciples and for the new movement Jesus is inaugurating on earth. But Peter is anything but a rock in our readings. Our three readings are like three scenes in a play.

Scene one: Jesus is telling the disciples that difficult times are ahead. He will be arrested and executed, and all this will test them also since they are his disciples. Jesus even predicts that they will abandon him and run away given how unprepared he believes they are for what's coming. But Peter will not stand for such negative talk. "Though all

become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' Jesus tells him that before the night's over, Peter will have deserted him repeatedly. But Peter refuses to accept this: "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."

Scene Two: Armed guards and a large crowd ready for violence have come to get Jesus. Peter and the others panic and run away. Jesus is grabbed, beaten and bound up. He is taken to the High Priest's mansion for initial questioning before being handed over to the Romans. Peter hasn't run away too far, though. He approaches the mansion and mingles with curious onlookers and soldiers just outside. They're all awaiting news of what's happening inside.

But then, he's recognized. "You also were with Jesus the Galilean," A young woman tells him. Peter is caught. Fear grabs hold of him. He panics. He denies he knows Jesus or has anything to do with Jesus. But then, the woman starts telling others: "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Peter gets even more panicked and denies even more vehemently that he has anything to do with Jesus. Then a group of men approach Peter telling him: "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Peter swears by heaven and by earth that he has absolutely nothing to do with this Jesus fellow. Wow. And then, the cock crows. The night is gone. Morning has come. What had Jesus predicted? Peter suddenly remembers. He can hold it together no longer. He runs out of the courtyard in shame, weeping bitterly.

Jesus is tried and found guilty of blasphemy for claiming to be the messiah of God and leading people astray. He is found guilty of treason for supposedly claiming to be a rival king to the emperor. He is executed in the most brutal and publicly shameful way Rome knows to make an example of him – crucifixion. The disciples scatter and then gather in various hovels. They're dealing with their shame, their failure, their grief, their bewilderment and loss. They're in deep crisis.

And then, something happens, something totally unexpected. The disciples were, indeed, unprepared for it all – not only everything leading up to Jesus' horrible death, but everything that would come after. As much as Jesus may have talked about these things, absorbing them and living them is a whole other matter. And now we come to the final scene.

Scene 3: The group of 12 disciples has indeed scattered as Jesus had predicted. The original group have gone back to their family business – fishing. But one morning, something happens. They're not having much success catching anything. But then, from the shore, a man calls out: 'try throwing your fishing nets on the other side.' Ok. Whoever this guy is, his suggestion can't hurt. They've been having no luck anyway. And so, they throw their nets on the other side and suddenly, they feel the weight of fish caught and struggling in the nets. Recognition washes over Peter. He knows who this guy is. But can it be? Can it be after everything they saw and lived? He can't wait to

find out. Past the shame and sense of failure and everything else, he can't wait for the boat to get back to shore. He jumps in the water and swims to shore. It's Jesus! Wow! How can it be?! It doesn't matter, it just is! What joy!

But there's still lots of unfinished business. And so, after breakfast, as they're sitting around the campfire staring into the flames and absorbing all that's happening, Jesus asks Peter a question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me? Notice he's not calling him Peter right now. "Do you love me more than all this, your current life, your attachment to things as they are, your fear, your shame, all that's keeping you back... Do you love me?" "Yes Lord," Peter exclaims, "You know that I love you." "Then Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep..." Jesus tells him. Three times, this happens, just like Peter's denials. Wow, this must hurt. Peter is reminded that he's no rock. He denied Jesus three times. But Jesus is also calling him again. Jesus is calling Peter to use his experience, his experience of fear, shame and failure to become an even more effective fisher of persons. "I forgive you Peter. But you must face what you have done and use it to become compassionate and understanding and therefore an even more effective rock for my new movement." Peter has been given a renewed purpose and direction. He's being called again. All he's lived will serve his call.

And now, back to Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer doesn't get out of prison. His purpose and call must be different. One morning he is called out of his cell. He is brought outside into a courtyard. There is blood and other human fluids all over the ground. There is a hangman's noose. Bonhoeffer is executed by hanging. But before he dies, we know he has found his purpose again. Let me reread his poem with the last line added in:

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Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine..."

Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

Bonhoeffer was a rock for other prisoners. That's what we're told by those who survived. He helped them find faith and hope when they were at their breaking point. And this all had to do with Bonhoeffer finding renewed assurance himself - being held in God even when he also felt broken and fragmented inside.

Like Bonhoeffer, like Peter, like many soldiers who come back, like many of us too in different ways: We need to find our purpose and our direction again and again. As life happens, whether it's new doors opening and new possibilities before us, or whether it's disappointment, failure, shame and loss, we need to find our divine call again and again, to bless the world in some way and find our personal fullness and peace at the same time.

May the God above us, Christ beside us and the Spirit within us be our guide and inspiration; Amen.