

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Poor Peter, he just can't seem to get it right. He tries so very hard -- yet -- he often seems to fall short. Think of the stories we recall about Peter -- his botched attempt to walk on the water, his falling asleep when he should have been keeping watch, his denial of Jesus not once but three times.

Peter really wants to please God, he wants to walk with Jesus, yet things keep going wrong. He does or says the wrong thing. At these times his life must have seemed frustrating. It isn't that he always gets it wrong. Peter had recently answered one question correctly. When Jesus asked him, "who do you say I am?" Peter correctly responded: "The Messiah of God".

And, now, on this unnamed mountain, having seen Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Peter thinks he gets it. And in his enthusiasm Peter responds by telling Jesus that they need to build three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. But that was the wrong answer. Luke clearly tells us it is the wrong answer -- that Peter didn't know what he was saying. Why was it wrong? He wants to build something, three tents, that will honor the experience he has just witnessed. Whatever could be wrong with that?

To begin with, Peter had just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the long awaited Saviour. Yet in wanting to build three tents, one for each of those he saw: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, he just might have forgotten his declaration in the awe and excitement of the moment. He just might be seeing them as equals which we know isn't true. Moses who represents the Law -- and Elijah who represents the Prophets were not the Messiah of God. Jesus is greater than both Moses and Elijah, greater than the Law and the Prophets.

The other problem, and a bigger one for us today, is with Peter's tent-building desire. Is Peter wanting to build a memorial where he can come back to visit and to remember this event? Peter could then come back to this place, over and over to recall this one experience of God. Perhaps, but it just might be that Peter was wanting to capture God; to contain God. Think back to when the Israelites were wandering in the desert. They took the Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle with them as it was where God resided.

In doing this, Peter might be able to gain control over what must have felt like a very uncontrolled and confusing experience. Rather than living in those confusing moments, Peter was going to take action, take control, attempt to bring order from what he most likely found to be disorienting.

But being a disciple of Jesus is not about attempting to control God or to contain the impact God has in our lives. Being a disciple isn't about returning to a special place over and over to remember an encounter we once had with God. Rather, our encountering God is much more than recalling or recreating a moment. It is much more than putting God in a tent of our making.

God points Peter in the right direction when Peter hears God say "This is my chosen one. Listen to him!" Listen to what Jesus has been saying and doing. Listen to what Jesus will say and do. In doing that you will learn what it means to be a disciple, a follower, the bearer of the Word. In doing that you will be transformed --both inwardly and outwardly.

Remember Moses in the reading from Exodus? Moses, too, experienced God's transforming power and grace. His face was glowing after he encountered God. Yet, the Israelites wanted Moses to cover his face. What they saw was not normal. It created a sense of things being out-of-kilter, not as they should be. They were hesitant about being exposed to God and to God's divine power and love. They wanted to contain God's radiance, God's transforming power in Moses, by having Moses cover his face with a veil.

So how does all this speak to us on this bridge Sunday between Epiphany and Lent? Epiphany, the time when we recall God breaking through to us, God being with us. And Lent, when we focus on listening to Jesus and examining our lives in light of his teachings. Both Epiphany and Lent are a time for learning from Jesus' words and his journey what it means to be disciples and to be baptized members of the body of Christ.

This Sunday begins the shift in focus as Jesus begins his journey towards Jerusalem and what awaits him there. This image of journey, of walking, invites us into Lent. Lent is a time of an inward journey of self-examination, a time of turning ourselves, or orientating ourselves, more fully with God.

The journey in faith with Jesus wasn't easy for Peter. It wasn't a stroll on warm sunny days in beautiful gardens. The cost of his journey of discipleship, of his saying "yes Lord, I believe" was heavy at times. More than once Peter gets it wrong. Peter fails to understand. His faith is tested and found shaky at times. Yet he was the one whom Jesus trusted to carry forth the message, to build Jesus' community.

It can be easy to think that after the resurrection Peter totally got it, that it was a light bulb moment, like in the comics. But we must remember it wasn't easy for Peter even then. Just as it is

not an easy journey for us. Like Peter our faith will be shaky at times. Like Peter we will fail to understand or even get it wrong.

Peter, after the resurrection continued to want to build tents. He had to adjust his thinking about leadership with the arrival of Paul. Until Paul, the essential mark of being an apostle was having journeyed personally with Jesus. We know that from the calling of Matthias in the book of Acts. Apostles were called from those men who had witnessed the baptism of Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, and all that occurred along the way.

Then there was Peter's struggle with what he viewed as the extremely unlikely possibility of Gentiles, people like you and me, being included in Jesus' family of believers. Until his encounter with Cornelius and his household, Peter believed that Jesus Christ came just for the Israelites, the Jewish community. In his belief he resisted going to Cornelius and baptizing his household. But in seeing the Holy Spirit poured out by God on Cornelius' household as they listened to the Word of God, Peter realized that it was not his place to withhold baptism.

It wasn't until Peter saw Cornelius and his household transformed that Peter understood that God could be their God, Jesus could be their Savior. They too could be baptized members of the body of Christ. Baptism, membership in the community, was to be open to all who embraced God's love. And in this encounter, Peter was again brought face-to-face with his need to keep God under control and discovering he could not.

So, what does Peter teach us?

That we are going to fall short? Yes

That we will want to place God in a tent at times? Most likely.

That we won't always get it? Definitely.

That we will want to reign in the chaos and so we can control the impact of God in our lives? Yup.

But there is something else -- Peter keeps at it, he keeps risking, he keeps striving to become more and more Christ like. Peter stays in relationship with Jesus even when he is confused, even when he wants to control the chaos. Even when he misses the mark. Even when God's Holy Spirit are headed in a direction he does not believe is possible, and possibly when it is a direction he doesn't want to go.

I can't begin to imagine how heart-breaking, how gut-rendering it must have been for Peter when, after Jesus' arrest, he heard the rooster crow that morning and realized he had denied Jesus. He

knew that once again he had fallen short. He didn't think he would -- he told Jesus he would never betray him and Jesus had responded, "yes you will -- in fact you will deny me three times before the rooster crows in the morning."

But Peter hangs in. Peter repents, weeps, and turns again to walking with God. Peter again and again returns to God's embracing and active love, allowing himself to be transformed by that very love. Peter over time, is, as we prayed in the collect, changed into Christ's likeness from glory to glory.

In our listening to God and walking with Jesus, we too will be transformed -- we too will glow with God's love -- we too will radiate to all of creation the love that God has for all. As we prepare to enter into Lent, we are challenged to listen to Jesus and in our listening, to reflect and examine our lives. Where are we walking in the presence of God and where are we attempting to control God? Where are we building our tents? Where are we open to God's transforming love that will change us and where have we put up veils to shield ourselves from God's love? Where are we going forth into the world radiating God's love and presence to all of creation and where are we returning to our own special places so that we can keep God's love and presence to ourselves?

Faithfulness isn't about freezing a moment or building a tent, but listening and following. It isn't about holding on to what has been but it is about going forward into the unknown, with our fears and doubts, and as best we can, trusting that God's Holy Spirit is with us, guiding us, no matter what.

God invites each of us, and the community of St. Luke's in these coming weeks, to listen and to follow in confidence -- trusting that together we will be transformed by God's love.

Will we, will you, accept this invitation? Will we embrace God's abundant and life giving love so that, like Peter, we are transformed into Christ's likeness from glory into glory?