

Kyrie, Peter's Shame, and the God of Easter-April 27, 2014  
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St. John 21: 15-19

Kyrie eleison -Lord have mercy

There is a setting of the Liturgy that I dislike above all other settings of the liturgy, because the Kyrie is so bouncy it sounds like a Fanta commercial. Kyrie eleison, on our world and on our way Kyrie eleison, every day. Like it's from a soundtrack of Up , With People!

And every time I hear it I think it sounds like, at any minute, the congregation might bust out jazz hands and a dance line.

Kyrie eleison indeed.

Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Catholics say or sing it every week, the Kyrie, the one piece of the Christian mass that is still in Greek. For some reason it never made it over to Latin like the rest of the liturgy did. But what do they mean by saying Lord, have mercy?

Some may say it's asking God to not punish us for our sin - to not rain down fury and violent retribution on us and maybe there's a place for that, but maybe Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, is just shorthand for please do not punish us &!\_ our sins ... maybe asking for God's mercy is like saying - we beg you God that our sin is not the final word. We beg you for your mercy to be with us, because ours is not enough. We pray for your wisdom to be with us, your loving kindness to be with us because we just don't have enough of our own.

And we keep messing everything up. It seems that especially in situations where we are overwhelmingly aware of our shortcomings and smallness that we beg this of God.

Peter surely understood this if anyone did. He had been a common fisherman when Jesus walked by and said follow me. Peter dropped his nets and everything he had known and followed this Jesus of Nazareth. And with him, walking the road together, Peter had seen great things. Miraculous wonders, healings, acts of power and grace. Peter was the first to call Jesus the messiah - he was, above all, earnest in his devotion.

And yet, when it came down to it, Peter, like so many of us, was unable to live up to even his own values and ideals. When the hour of Jesus' betrayal and death came, Peter

could not be the man he hoped he would be. Peter did not bravely stay by Jesus' side, choosing instead to slink away and anonymously warm himself by a charcoal fire. But you just can't warm feet that have gone that cold. And he did not go unnoticed, as he wished, because 3 times he was asked by passersby: "Wait you know him don't you?" and 3 times Peter said "I do not." He loved him yet in Jesus' hour of death, Peter denied he even knew him. He was tested and he was found wanting. Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy.

I simply cannot imagine what Peter felt about himself after that. Could he have been filled with anything ... anything but unfiltered remorse and regret and self-loathing? How could he live with himself? I do not know if Peter was punished for his sin but I'm certain he was punished by his sin. How many times after Jesus died did he replay those hours in his head, wishing beyond hope that he could just go back and change it. Re-write his own past. Lord, have mercy. Who among us can't relate to that feeling?

So in our Gospel text for today, when Peter jumps into the sea and encounters Jesus on the beach grilling fish over a charcoal fire, I imagine Peter's olfactory sense triggered memory of another charcoal fire. A charcoal fire around which he warmed himself with his own self-protection and fear. Denying his Lord and warming his hands. His own smell of shame.

But the resurrected Christ does such an unbelievably loving and merciful thing. He does not rebuke Peter for failing him in his time of need - instead he gives Peter breakfast and then he gives Peter 3 chances to proclaim his love. One for each of his denials. Do you love me Peter? With the smell of charcoal in his nostrils, I wonder if Peter could possibly have answered yes without tears in his eyes. I have failed you Lord and denied you in your hour of death, despite everything in me that knew it was wrong but yes. Three times yes. I love you Lord. Have mercy upon me.

The adjective so often coupled with mercy is the word tender, but this mercy was not tender, this mercy was a blunt instrument. Mercy doesn't wrap a warm, limp blanket around offenders, God's mercy is the kind that kills the thing which wronged it and resurrects something new in its place. In our guilt and remorse we may wish for nothing but the ability to re-write our own past, but what's done cannot, will not, be undone.

The words that we have spoken, cannot be unspoken. Our past cannot be re-written, but I am here to say that in the mercy of God it CAN be redeemed. I cling to this truth more than perhaps any other. I have to. I need to. I want to. For when we say Lord have mercy, what else could we possibly mean than this?

But God is a God of Easter.

And to say Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, is to lay our hope in the redeeming work of the God of Easter as though our lives depended on it because they do. It means that we are an Easter people, a people who know that Good Friday is never the final word, that resurrection - especially in and among the least likely people and places, is the way that God redeems our crap out of even the biggest messes we make. I've made some doozys in my life and somehow the fractures and lacerations caused by my selfishness or anger or my sharp tongue are never the final thing. God's redemptive work in the world is the final thing.

So either God can redeem everything or God can redeem nothing, and I stand here before you believing the former and not the later because it is Easter and the tomb was empty and Peter the Christ denier became Peter the rock. So, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. God can redeem anything. Alleluia. Amen.