

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

May 12, 2019, The 4th Sunday of Easter

(Preaching C-Easter 3 Texts)

Psalm 30, John 21:1-19

SITTING BY CHARCOAL FIRES WITH A UNICORN

There is an author, Patrick Taylor who grew up in the town of Bangor, Northern Ireland, next door to the village of Groomsport, where I spent a year as a student pastor. He writes novels that I enjoy, about that part of Northern Ireland in the 1960's. In his latest novel, *An Irish Country Cottage*, part of the story focus on the Donnelly family whose cottage, named Dun Bwee, is destroyed by a fire one night when the family are all asleep. The parents, Donal & Julie and three-and-a-half-year-old Tori and the young twins all make it out safely, with only the pajamas they are wearing.

But three-and-a-half-year-old Tori becomes convinced that the fire is her fault (cf: pp. 19-26, 171, 173)

The Donnelly family lives in another cottage while theirs is being fixed. Tori continues to have bad dreams, so her dad Donal decides to take her to see their cottage being repaired, so she'll know that everything is going to be okay.

He tells her: "Daddy and the other nice men are fixing Dun Bwee. Very soon it'll be good as new, so it will, and you and Daddy, and Mammy and the twins, will be able to move back in where we belong. Back in our own wee kitchen. Back in our own wee beds, and Bluebird (the dog) back in her run." p.240

For long moments Tori said nothing. Then her mouth opened into a soundless O. Tears welled. She dropped her dolly. Her moan began low and rose in pitch, to be followed by breathless crying, "I was a bad girl," she said between sobs. "Bad. Bad. I made the fire start."

No matter how much her parents and the adults around her try to convince her otherwise she is convinced that she has started the fire because she was playing with her ball beside the stove where she wasn't supposed to play. The fire started in the kitchen, so she is convinced she caused it.

As she gets more and upset Dr. Emer, one of the village doctors asks her parents' permission to try something. She pulls a book from her coat pocket, the story of *The Last Unicorn*. Through the girls sobs she begins to read: "*The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone. She didn't like being all alone and so she set out to find others of her kind. More unicorns.*" The little girl sobs quiet as her attention is caught. Tori wants to know what a unicorn is, she's never heard of one. Dr. Emer moves closer to her, "I've never seen one, but they are magical. They are pure white, like a horse—you've seen horses, haven't you? Well, unicorns have the body of a horse, a long mane, and in the middle of their forehead they have a single twisted horn." She shows the picture to Tori who smiles, saying, "She's very pretty." "Ah," Dr. Emer responds, "but they can be very fierce...Except—except if they find a little girl who has been very, very good...Then they put their heads in the little girl's lap and fall asleep."

"Honest? Honest to God?", Tori asks.

Dr. Emer nodded. "And I think you could get a unicorn to fall asleep in your lap, Tori, or eat off your hand. Your daddy and mammy tell me you're a very good girl." Tori's tears have stopped, she has something new to think about. (p. 268-270)

But in the weeks following, as the Donnelly's cottage is nearing completion, Tori continues to have nightmares, believing that she is bad, and caused the fire that destroyed the family home and all

their possessions. So, her father creates a plan and invites many of the adults who love the little girl to join him back at their cottage Dun Bwee for another visit.

Tori comes out of the car to greet her father, who in comforting tones points out all the people who have come to be with her. He points out how beautiful their cottage is looking, but Tori begins to weep again, crying her refrain: "It was all my fault. Tori's a bad girl."

So Donal and Dr. Emer begin their plan. They disappear around the side of the cottage and as they return Donal calls to his daughter: "Tori, Tori. Look. Look what Dr. Emer's found."

"(Dr.) Emer took a few more paces, and as she advanced (back around the cottage), a white head with a bright white spiral horn in the middle of its forehead appeared. ...she "kept walking and soon the whole white animal was in full view, long tail swishing, ears twitching."

Remember what we talked about the doctor asks. "Yes," says Tori, "and is that a unicorn?" Dr. Emer replies that she has just come from the Lilac Wood...

"Tori," she asks, "...Should you and I try to tame her completely?"

Tori nodded... "I forget how."

"Remember what I told you? Only good little girls can get a unicorn to eat from their hand."

Tori sniffed. "But I'm not a good little girl."

"..." I know you are, Tori," Dr. Emer said. "And I want you to try, but have stand up on your own feet to do it."

Tori's mom sets her down on the ground and Dr. Emer helps Tori hold her hand flat and puts a sugar cube in it. "Give it to the unicorn."

"Tori sniffed, swallowed, took one pace past Dr. Emer, ...and held out her outstretched hand. The unicorn lowered its head ...as the big...lips caressed Tori's palm and the cube vanished."

"Here," said Emer, giving Tori a second cube, "do it again."

Tori stood beside the animal, gently but firmly petting its mane and talking softly. "Tori's a good girl, Mummy. The unicorn ate out of my hand." (Her mom) bent and kissed the top of Tori's head. "It did, Tori, Darling. You're a brave, good wee girl." (p. 325-27)

There was not a dry eye in the circle of friends as Dr. Emer said to the little girl: "I hope, Miss Tori Donnelly, that now you believe us, ...you are a good girl. You are." And Tori's laugh echoes off the walls of the family's rebuilt cottage.

So where did the unicorn come from? Donal, worried for weeks about his young Tori's guilt for something she hadn't done, came up with a plan when he heard the story of *The Last Unicorn*. He remembered that a neighbor had a white Shetland pony. Another neighbor made a white hat for the pony with two wide side straps and a shorter back strap to attach to the bridle. Donal himself got a piece of pine wood and turned it on his lathe, keeping the top end blunt so it would be safe, and painted it white. (329-330)

A unicorn was created by people who loved a little girl and wanted to free her from the guilt and fear that held onto her. A unicorn was created by love.

Taylor, Patrick, *An Irish Country Cottage*, New York: Forge/Macmillan, 2018

It is that kind of love, that we hear in this morning's story from John's gospel. Just as the Donnelly family and their friends found a way to heal young Tori's heart, Jesus found a way to heal Peter's heart and show us the depths of his forgiveness for us all.

When I was at the conference out in Oregon in February one of the pastor's there pointed out the charcoal fire in this morning's story from John 19, and told me that a charcoal fire only appears one other place in all of the New Testament.

On the night of Jesus' arrest and trial before the High Priest Caiaphas, you may remember that Peter followed Jesus and the guards into the courtyard of the High Priest's house. The Jewish Temple police and the slaves "had made a charcoal fire because it was cold and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself." (v. 18) It is there, with the scent of the charcoal fire in his nostrils that the questions come at Peter:

The guard at the gate asks: "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you? "I am not," Peter answers.

The temple police ask: "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you? "I am not," Peter answers.

One of the slaves of the high priest asks: "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" "You did not," Peter answers.

And as Jesus had foretold, the rooster crows,
the charcoal fire continues to burn,
Jesus is led away to be condemned.
And Peter's heart is broken.

(John 18:15-18, 25-27)

Then, after Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross, after Jesus has risen from death and the Good News has gone out that he is alive, after Jesus has appeared to the disciples in the upper room, and again a week later, he comes to them a third time (v. 14)

As we read this morning in John's gospel, Peter and some of the disciples are at the Sea of Galilee. They are back where it all began, and they have gone fishing. On the shore they see Jesus, who after giving them some very good fishing advice, calls to them to come and have breakfast.

Imagine you are Peter. You are overjoyed and overwhelmed by the resurrection of the Messiah you follow.

But in your heart and in your gut echo your denials: "I do not know him, I am not one of his followers, I do not know him."

You come onto the shore and what do you smell? You smell the charcoal fire. There it is in front of you, a fire just like the one on the night you betrayed Jesus.

Science tells us that the sense of smell, maybe more than any other sense, is related to memory.

Peter, haunted by the memory of his denials, now sits with Jesus around the charcoal fire, smelling the scent of his three denials and shame, reliving his worst memory.

Jesus, who comes to each of us in our places of brokenness, denial, and shame doesn't do this to break Peter's spirit more, or accuse him of his betrayal.

I see that charcoal fire as a gift to Peter.

We see how deep Jesus' love is when he builds that charcoal fire on the beach,
because it asks Peter to go to the depths of his brokenness and sorrow,
because there is healing there.

Because what Jesus does next is to ask Peter three new questions. Peter, who answered three times that he didn't know Jesus now answers these three new questions.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Peter answers: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love.

Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

Jesus said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

The Bible says: "Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?"
 And he said to Jesus, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."
 Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 229.2.5, and the "official rehabilitation of Simon Peter" p. 230.1.7)*

Two charcoal fires: one at a place of denial, one at a place of healing.

Two sets of three questions and three answers:

One set of questions and answers filled with accusation and denial.

One set of questions and answers filled with love and affirmations of faith.

A new charcoal fire and new questions,

offering Peter the healing gift of love,

leading to a call to ministry in Jesus' name;

leading Peter to go from the beach to invite the world to become followers of Jesus.

With the love of Northern Irish villagers creating a mythical unicorn for a three-and-a-half-year-old living with crippling guilt,

With the love of our risen Savior, who builds a new charcoal fire and asks new questions,

Jesus comes to each of us with love enough to heal what is broken in our hearts.

In the places where we have denied or betrayed Jesus by what we have done or not done, Jesus offers us complete healing and new life.

In the places where the old voices still accuse us, the old choices still haunt us, the old decisions still break us,

Jesus offers us complete healing and new life.

In the places where the past stomps into our nightmares, naming us as unworthy, unforgivable and too broken to be healed,

Jesus offers us complete healing and new life.

This is the promise of the empty cross and the empty tomb; this is the promise of Easter morning:

We follow a risen Savior, who conquered sin and evil and death for all time, who reaches out to you and to me with deep forgiveness, complete healing and welcoming love.

We follow a Savior who will take the time to build charcoal fires for each of us on our beaches of brokenness and despair, and grief and shame.

Because the love that took Jesus to the cross,

and brought Jesus from death to new life, leaving the tomb empty,

is love that is for you and for me.

And nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from that charcoal fire building love. Alleluia! Amen!