



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, June 30, 2019**

*The Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul  
(transferred)*

*Festal Eucharist  
at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Ezekiel 34:11-16, 2 Timothy 4:1-8, and John 21:15-19

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### **Relationships Not Transactions**

Last week, Fr. Spencer spoke beautifully about the incarnation and the particularity of God's engagement with the world and through the sacramental life of the Church. He said this, *"one of the many scandalous and strange things about the Christian God is that divine concern for and involvement in these particular moments of this particular, ordinary life of mine or yours."* (Sermon, June 23, 2019 at 11 am)

#### **That divine concern for and involvement in this ordinary life of mine.**

Peter and Paul, whose memory we commemorate today, knew about that scandalous, divine concern for people because they experienced it through their relationship with Jesus. They experienced God's involvement in the particularity of their own lives. And they knew it all too painfully because of their human frailty, their failures and their mistakes, and the way that Jesus – the Word made flesh – still walked with them in spite of their human frailty, their failures and mistakes. Or, perhaps it might be better to say that Jesus continued to journey with them *because* of their human frailty, their failures and mistakes.

Warming himself by a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest's house, a bystander insisted, *"Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean."* But Peter said, *"Man, I do not know what you are talking about!"* At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. *"The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly."* (Luke 22:59-62)

Paul, writing to the Corinthian Church says, *"I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."* (1 Corinthians 15:9-10)

There seems so much that is contradictory or conflicted in the lives of Peter and Paul yet Jesus called them just as he calls you and me. As Thérèse of Lisieux liked to say, *"God does not choose the people worthy of the calling – he chooses the people it pleases him to choose."* (From 'Story of a Soul'). Or, to use those words of St. Paul again - **'by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.'**

By another charcoal fire, Jesus took Peter aside *'and said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"* Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, *"Do you love me?"* And he said to him, *"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."*

Three reminders of love to contrast with three denials of love but Jesus also knew only too well how costly it would be for Peter to truly love and follow him.

Last Wednesday, we reached a milestone in our Parish's Strategic Planning process when the Vestry considered all the research and consultation of the last ten months and voted unanimously to press forward towards five strategic goals and to develop initiatives and action plans around each of them. One of the strategic goals is titled 'Belonging and Trust' and one of our Vestry members said something that I have been reflecting on since then and which seems to say something about this great Feast Day we are celebrating as much as about our own community at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue. He said this: *"People are looking for relationships. They are not looking for transactions."*

Belonging and trust matters not because we have an entitlement to things but because God lavishes his love and forgiveness on each one of us and in spite of who we are or the brokenness of our lives or of our community. Jesus came to show us how. As the Eucharistic Prayer puts it so beautifully, *"not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses."*

Sadly, the Church sometimes does not live out this vocation – to be a place of love, acceptance, and forgiveness – a community where relationships rather than transactions matter. Churches often use the slogan "All are welcome" on their notice-boards but have not always lived up to it. Sometimes, we are called to do brave things: Peter broke all the rules he had learned when he went into the home of Cornelius the Centurion – an outsider with different customs and he was criticised for it – yet, on that day, Peter was doing exactly what the Lord prompted him to do and the Holy Spirit fell mightily on those first Gentile converts. Paul, a former Pharisee, travelled all the way back to Jerusalem from Antioch with Barnabas in order to beg the emerging Church to let go of some of the most formative Jewish traditions – traditions that he had once cherished, so that all would be welcomed into the Christian Community.

*People are looking for relationships. They are not looking for transactions.*

Today's feast gives us hope – hope that, in spite of our clumsy attempts to be welcoming; in spite of our unworthiness; in spite of our inability at times to be forgiving, in spite of our struggling to be a community of love and acceptance, Jesus is still looking intently at each one of us, at you and at me, as he looked at Peter and Paul, and is asking you and me the same question that he asked Peter: **"Do you love me?"**

My friends, let our answer be *'yes'* – even if it is a faltering yes that is whispered in his ear.

If we do that, then we will also hear his voice saying, *'Follow me.'*

Let me end with a sonnet for St. Peter by the priest-poet, Malcolm Guite

Impulsive master of misunderstanding  
You comfort me with all your big mistakes;  
Jumping the ship before you make the landing,  
Placing the bet before you know the stakes.  
I love the way you step out without knowing,  
The way you sometimes speak before you think,  
The way your broken faith is always growing,  
The way he holds you even when you sink.  
Born to a world that always tried to shame you,  
Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,  
I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,  
Before you knew how to deserve that name.  
And in the end your Saviour let you prove  
That each denial is undone by love.