

The New Newness

John 21:15-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 16, 2022/5th Sunday of Easter

We are on to scene three in our post-resurrection tour exploring how and where and to whom Jesus shows up after Easter. We've been asking the question, "Where and how does the risen Christ show up in our world and in our lives?"

Last week, I began my sermon in the McDonald's drive thru. Today, we are going to Japan. I want to introduce you to a man named Makoto Fujimura.

Fujimura is a contemporary artist, arts advocate, writer, and speaker who is recognized worldwide. He is the son of a scientist, born in Boston, MA, but raised in his early years in Japan where his dad was a professor at Tokyo University. He returned to America as a teenager and finished high school in New Jersey.

After college, he felt "called" to pursue a career as an artist. He acknowledges the irony of using the language of calling because he was not raised to be religious and would not have understood his vocation in Christian categories at this time.

At any rate, Fujimura returned to Japan to study at an extremely prestigious program in Tokyo, through the Tokyo University of Fine Arts.

It was during his studies in Tokyo that Makoto Fujimura became a most unlikely thing in Japan. A Christian. He outlines the process of how this came about in his book *Silence and Beauty* which I have ordered and look forward to reading.

He has become a prominent voice in the world of art and faith. He has taught courses around the world, including at Regent College in Vancouver (sadly, he was not there when I attended!).

In fact, I recently came across an interview with him in a Regent College Publication where he gave what I thought was a memorable response to the question of whether he considered himself a "Christian" artist or what he thought of this label.

I was always an artist but realized that I was blind. Christ opened my eyes. I am an artist who has learned to truly “see” in Christ. **I do not consider myself a “Christian” artist. The word “Christian” should be used as a noun, not an adjective.**¹

Amen.

At any rate, Fujimura’s life as a Christian has not always been an easy one. At this point I’m going to let him tell the story:

I had married my first wife out of college. When I came back to the U.S., we had two children then, and one on the way. We moved into New York City... [began] working to expand church planting movements.

As it turned out, we had moved into what would soon become Ground Zero. Five years later, we were severely traumatized by 9/11. Then, we just ... burned out. My wife could not recover from the trauma of 9/11. So, we moved out of the city to Princeton, New Jersey, where I live now, and settled down into a three-acre farm and started to work here, painting and writing. We had a good three years, I would say. It felt like things were turning the right way. But then, all of a sudden, my wife couldn’t... continue. She had to sever completely from the past. She left suddenly.

My father passed away a month after that, and my mother a year after that. **I went through about three years of terrific darkness. But so much was accomplished in that darkness. It was one of the darkest periods of my life, and yet there was redemption in it...** [I]n that period, I began to do work that became very much part of my [most important] work of recent times, responding to various traumas, from 9/11 terrorist attacks to the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, to the Columbine High School murders.

I was simply trying to work this all out into something that could become beautiful. Much of it was just sheer effort to understand my own heart, to face the Ground Zero reality in front of me directly, but with the kind of passion I’ve always had—**believing that art can actually become a voice of healing in the fractured places.** I found myself creatively during that time.²

Fujimura has since remarried. His wife is an attorney working to advocate for vulnerable people being trafficked. He’s also recently written what he calls his “life’s work,” a book called *Art +*

¹ <https://world.regent-college.edu/profile/the-art-of-seeing>

² <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/65465-makoto-fujimura-behold-the-fragments-part-1.html>

Faith: A Theology of Making. It's a book that proceeds on the assumption that God is, as he puts it, "the only true Artist, who invites us to be artists with a small 'a.'"

In *Art and Faith*, Makoto Fujimura devotes an entire chapter to the Japanese art of *kintsugi* — literally, "golden joinery."

In *kintsugi*, instead of hiding a flaw in a piece of broken pottery, the artist highlights and even celebrates the damage by repairing it—joining broken pieces together with a special lacquer that is dusted with gold, silver, or platinum.

The restoration is more beautiful than the original precisely *because of* rather than *despite* its repaired brokenness.

Kintsugi is more than just an art form. It is a philosophy that understands breakage and repair as normal parts of human life. Instead of denying or downplaying our faults and failures, we find ways to see our imperfections as part of something bigger and potentially more beautiful that is coming into being.

Fujimura describes it like this:

Kintsugi... soothes a broken fracture by accentuating it, making the resulting mended object more interesting and valuable than the original. It's literally a new creation, and I think it is as much theological work as it is aesthetic work.³

It "soothes a broken fracture by accentuating it." "It's literally a new creation."

This has been the story of Fujimura's art and the story of his life. The three years of terrific darkness that he endured became one of the ways in which the Divine Artist invited him to become a small 'a' artist, bringing something beautiful out of the cracked places.

Kintsugi has become a central part of Fujimura's vocation. He tells the story of meeting a *kintsugi* master in Tokyo who used this art to help orphaned children in northern Japan after the tsunami and earthquake disaster.

This friend came up with this method of using a cashew-based lacquer that is safe for children to handle. He thought it would be important for these children to learn to mend fractured valuable objects themselves as a way of moving through the grief of losing parents and grandparents.

³ <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/65465-makoto-fujimura-behold-the-fragments-part-1.html>

This inspired Fujimura to start the Kintsugi Academy to spread this vision around the world. He says: “*Kintsugi* has now become so much more than this traditional Japanese form—**it has become kind of a movement of mending to make new.**”⁴

This is usually the point of the sermon where I say something like, “you may be wondering what the previous ten minutes have to do with our passage of Scripture.”

Today, I suspect you’re not wondering at all. I suspect you know precisely where this is all going. I hope so.

But if not, I’ll make it clear. I think that Jesus is the Divine *kintsugi* master. We see it as we return to the beach by the Sea of Galilee where last week Jesus served breakfast to the disciples after a miraculous catch of fish.

Actually, before we get to the beach, we need to go back a few chapters in John’s gospel. Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest in Jerusalem. Jesus is being interrogated and his disciples are beginning to scatter.

Peter is warming himself by a charcoal fire made by the slaves and the police. He is approached on three separate occasions and asked if he is one of Jesus’ disciples. One each occasion, Peter denies it.

After the third denial, the rooster crows and a devastated Peter is brought back to an earlier conversation with Jesus. Jesus has told his disciples that they cannot follow him where he is going. Peter brashly declares that he will lay down his very life for Jesus. And then Jesus says, “Is that so? Before the rooster crows, you will have denied me three times” (John 13:36-38).

And now, after all that has happened, Jesus and Peter have another conversation around another charcoal fire (the symmetry is deliberate) on the beach over breakfast.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter, “do you love me?” One for each betrayal. Again, this divine symmetry.

I can imagine the shame that Peter would have felt as Jesus asked him these questions. By the third time, the text says he “felt hurt.” We can almost hear the resignation in his voice when he says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

⁴ <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/65465-makoto-fujimura-behold-the-fragments-part-1.html>

Each time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, he responds by saying, “Feed my sheep/lambs.” Peter still has a vital part to play in the story. Jesus still trusts Peter. Still loves Peter.

Peter’s betrayal does not mean that he is damaged goods, that he is beyond hope or promise, that Jesus is giving up on him for more favourable disciple prospects.

Jesus is doing what Jesus does. Meeting people in compassion and then moving on to dignify them by challenging them to stand up and start living more fully into their calling.

He does this throughout the gospels. To Thomas, to a woman caught in adultery, to a paralytic by a pool, to a Samaritan woman by a well. In each case, Jesus enters the circumstance of a hurting human being, offering love, kindness, care, touch.

And then he moves beyond that with a challenge. Stop sinning. Believe. Tell the truth. Follow me.

And he does it here to Peter, meeting Jesus in the pain and shame of his betrayal, restoring him in love, and telling him to get to work in feeding his sheep.

And he zeroes in on Peter, specifically. Even when Peter tries to change the subject. *What about him?* Peter says, pointing at John.

Jesus keeps the focus personal. Don’t worry about others. I am calling *you*. I am creating something new out of *you*, personally. Follow me.

Jesus is putting Peter back together again, like a broken piece of pottery.

And Peter would indeed become a new creation, not without scars, not without cracks, not flawless, but faithful. He would become one of the pillars of the early church, speaking boldly for Christ for the remainder of his days.

And his brash declaration that preceded his betrayal becomes reality. He will indeed lay down his life for Jesus.

Early Church tradition says that Peter probably died by crucifixion (with arms outstretched) at the time of the Great Fire of Rome in the year 64. Tradition also says that he insisted upon being crucified head down because he was unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

One commentator summarized Jesus’ work in restoring Peter like this:

Peter never became perfect in this vale of tears; he would fail... again. But when the time came, he proved himself ready to love like his master, ready to lay down his life for the gospel with which he was entrusted. He did not remain encumbered by the weight of what he had done in the past. **Peter's compromises and mishaps and outright transgressions did not impede him from witnessing to the power of Jesus Christ to obliterate what is dead and useless and to usher in life.**⁵

Makoto Fujimura calls his chapter on *kintsugi* “the new newness.” Peter is an example of a “new newness.”

His cracks and scars and failures did not disappear when Jesus encountered him on the beach after his resurrection. They became part of the new creation that Jesus was bringing into being.

I imagine Peter looking something like one of those bowls with a crack running right through the middle but looking all the more beautiful because of how it has been used in the creation of something bigger.

And the Divine Artist does the same thing with each one of us.

We may not all have had spectacular failures like Peter's. But each one of us have cracks and imperfections. We're misshapen here or there. Maybe there are broken pieces, traumatic events that we have endured. Maybe we have hurt those we love or been hurt by them.

Maybe there have been dark seasons of doubt, roads that we wandered down that turned out to be mostly dead ends.

And maybe we haven't betrayed Jesus explicitly, but we've betrayed him in countless small ways throughout our lives.

Or maybe it's all of the above, to varying degrees.

None of us make it through life without scars, whether due to what we have done or what has been done to us. This is the nature of being human in an unfinished world.

I think the natural human instinct is to focus on the bad things that leave their marks on us. Jesus uses the bad things to create something new, something beautiful. A “new newness.”

⁵ <https://mbird.com/bible/a-love-unto-death/>

And so, this week, in response to the question of our four-week post-Easter tour, How and where and to whom does the risen Christ show up in our world after Easter, we say:

The risen Christ shows up in the midst of human failure and shame, speaking peace, love, and hope. This has been a consistent theme of our tour thus far.

The risen Christ shows up as the Divine Artist—the *kingsugi master*—gently working with the broken pieces and setting to work in creating something beautiful and new.

The risen Christ shows up with an assignment. He doesn't just pat Peter on the head and say, "There, there, it's ok, I still love you" and leave it at that.

He says, "I have a job for you to do. You have a role to play in the story that will be written from this point forward. Don't focus only on what's been broken. Don't worry about what I am doing in other people's stories. I have called *you*. Follow me.

This is the great hope of Christianity. No failure is final. No matter what stage of our journey we are on, the risen Christ is always ready to begin to create something beautiful with our lives.

A "new newness" is always possible.

Amen.

