

Luke 22:33-34, 54-62

“Rejected, Rebounded and Redeemed”

“Forgiveness”
by Ann Weems

“I was wrong, arrogantly, self-righteously wrong.
So interested in being understood, I didn’t understand.
So anxious to be right, I didn’t see your pain.
How is it then that you are the one to bring flowers?”

Good poetic words by the late Ann Weems, ones Peter might have found helpful to have heard after his denial of his friend, Jesus. Surely, anguish and despair filled Peter after he turned his back on his friend during Jesus’ most crucial moments when he needed a friend.

But the story does not end in rejection, it ends in redemption. You see, Peter returned to where he first met Jesus – on a beach while he was fishing. It is there that the one that is denied reaches out and offers forgiveness and healing to the denier.

Christ still reaches out to us when we deny him through our rejection of others. Maybe it is not on a beach. Quite possibly, it is in a supermarket or on a street corner, in a sanctuary or maybe, even be on a basketball court.

Swish! Nothin’ but net, as the ball spun gracefully through the hoop and then bounded onto the ground. Gary walked to retrieve it, picked it up and then began dribbling.

Each time he dribbled he seemed to pound the ball a little bit harder onto the court. Then he held it for a moment, turned to square up to the basket and let go of a jump shot from the corner.

Clunk! The ball careened off the back side of the rim and bounded wildly off into the opposite direction from where Gary had shot it.

Stupid ball! Gary took off in a huff trying to run down the basketball before it got too far from the court. This time when he caught up with the it, he sat down on the ground beside it and gazed out onto the old blacktop court.

The sun was beginning to break across the eastern horizon, sending the darkness scurrying for cover in the West. Gary stretched and yawned. He could not believe he had been shooting hoops through the night.

He surveyed the old court and noticed how worn the asphalt court had become over the years. Loose pieces of gravel and cracks seemed to cover the surface. The foul lines were long ago worn off and except for the free throw line, that now seemed to have a permanent indentation from many a young boy and girl stepping up to take aim, nothing but the two rusted goal posts remained to remind one that this was indeed a basketball court.

In his mind, Gary laughed and then a faint smile snuck out and cracked his lips as memories began to dance in his head. It was here on the court that he had first come to play when he was just six years old. It was a sunny yet cool October afternoon. His mother had brought him over so he could play with the brand new basketball he had received for his birthday. She sat at a picnic table and watched as he tried to dribble and then shot jump shots just the way Larry Bird had shot them. However, he couldn't quite hit the rim.

It was on that day that he first met Bill. Bill was also six years old and like Gary had come to shoot around. At least, until the bigger boys came along and ran them off the court or would allow them to sit on the side lines and watch, giving them the opportunity to chase down loose balls and throw them back to their hardwood heroes.

They used to love to sit and watch the older guys play and talk about how great of players they were going to be when they grew up.

When they grew up. Gary hung his head. A tear seemed to be trickling down his cheek.

Gary rose from the ground and began dribbling the ball again. It was on this old court that he and Bill honed their basketball skills. It was also here that the two of them formed a close-knit friendship that extended beyond the court and basketball. As they grew, they developed into an inseparable twosome. It was not too many years later when the older guys began to take notice of the pair. Soon, both were competing in the after school pickup games, even though they still were years younger than the other guys.

Gary dribbled left then cut back right switching his dribble and putting a head fake on his imaginary defender then pulling up and firing a jumper from the top of the key. The ball floated gracefully through the air spinning round and round and then it began falling towards the hoop. Smack, the ball kissed off the front of the rim. Gary shook his head in disgust. He seemed to have lost the old touch that once had made him famous for his sweet jumpers. But that was not all that he was lamenting. He was also lamenting his friendship with Bill.

This old court was more than a blacktop playground basketball court. It was more than just a place that he and Bill had honed their skills. This court was something special. It was their place. Their refuge from the world and all of its troubles. It was a place that they could come and talk over all of the issues they faced as growing teenagers. It was here they talked about life,

family problems, school, careers, faith and religion, even dating and sex. Whoever held the basketball had permission to talk. No subject was rejected. Questions were encouraged, doubts accepted, and answers, well they were few in number. It was here that they dreamed dreams and saw new visions for their lives, first as college players, then hopefully into the professional ranks before returning to coach.

They came to the court after school, or dates, or work or church. Even after they were supposed to be asleep, sometimes they would slip out to play a late-night game of one-on-one or just to talk things over if something was on their mind. If their parents ever thought they were missing, they first came to this place before they began to worry.

Gary stood in the small dip where the free throw line was supposed to be. He gazed at the rim concentrating not so much on shooting but, on him and Bill's friendship.

They were best friends. A bond of loving trust and devotion had been forged through the years. Many a time they had stood beside each other when either's character or integrity had been challenged, be they right or wrong.

But last night at the meeting of the local school board, where Bill had come as the high school basketball coach to address the school board and community, that bond of trust and friendship had been broken. You might even say shattered.

As much as Bill needed Gary's friendship and support in his greatest moment of vulnerability and need, Gary had turned away in silence, fearful of the communities' reaction towards him and his own career.

The look on Bill's face when he spoke of his having AIDS was burned into Gary's memory. AIDS! Bill had contracted the HIV-AIDS virus. Gary could not shake the word and Bill's news from that echoed hauntingly in his ear.

Gary had angrily left the school board meeting when several people around him began to make derogatory comments about Bill and then questioned whether Gary was his friend.

Gary could not even stand up for his friend. He was scared for his own job and reputation, so he quietly slipped out of the meeting. But not before he turned one last time to stare at Bill standing at the podium. It was then that Bill caught Gary's eye and fell silent in the middle of his speech.

Into the night Gary had run. Trying to hide but finding no cover. When he could find no other place to comfort his soul, he had come back to where he and Bill had first met and become friends.

Why the basketball court? Well, maybe, to find some mercy for denying his friend and maybe to seek some healing to the broken and shattered friendship.

Here was where they both had always come when things went amuck in their lives. So why not tonight, when things went totally amuck?

Gary gazed back at the rim. His eyesight was blurred because of the tears. He took careless aim and let fly the free throw. Just as he released the ball, the morning sun burst over the horizon and blinded him further. "Air ball, air ball", came a voice from behind him. "You never could hit the broad side of a barn." Gary was startled by the voice not as much because he thought he was alone in the wee hours of the morning, but because it was Bill's voice.

"I thought you might be here, Gary," Bill said. "I have been looking for you all night. I had to find you. I knew you would be hurting and even angry with me. I don't blame you for leaving tonight. It was not a pleasant experience, but I am glad you came. Your presence meant everything to me. It's okay. I forgive you. You are still my friend."

Gary dropped to his knees and began to weep. He wept for his friend and their friendship. He wept for his brokenness. He wept for the gift of friendship God had given him. He wept for the gift of forgiveness his friend had offered him.

Bill walked over to where Gary was kneeling and knelt beside him. He held out the basketball to Gary and said, "How about a game of H-O-R-S-E."

Rejected by Peter, his friend, during the most critical time of his life on earth, the resurrected Christ appeared to Peter where they first had met, on a sandy beach while Peter was fishing. It was there that he offered forgiveness and redemption to his friend Peter.

Maybe it was not the story of Peter and Jesus, but for Gary, who like Peter, had witnessed the power of the risen Lord, not on a beach but, on a basketball court in the form of his friend Bill, who had reached out not with a loaf of bread and a piece of fish but, rather, with a basketball and a game of H-O-R-S-E and offered him redemption.

And I ask you, when in your life have you denied a friend or family member only to encounter the Risen Lord who reached out to you and offered you redemption?

"Communion"

By

Ann Weems

Gently – like rain on a spring-warm day
the words fell into my face,
splashing, rolling, and embedding in the burrows of my being:
'The Blessings of Christ be with You'.

There in the midst of broken bread
in a world of broken bodies and splintered spirits,
the communion of saints became new again,
washed once more in blessing and promise.