

Another Chance

John 21:1-19

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One day a boy in the seventh grade brought home his report card for his parents to review and sign. It wasn't something the boy was looking forward to, because he had two Ds and an F for the grading period. As his mother looked over the card, her face was getting more and more flushed with anger. Finally, she looked at the boy and said, "Well, what do you have to say for yourself, young man?"

After a moment or two the boy sheepishly replied, "At least you know I'm not cheating!"

It's not very easy to put a positive spin on failure, is it?

What do you do with failure?

Sometimes when we fail it means the end of the line. Failure may mean that you can no longer attend a school. Failure may mean you can no longer work at a particular job or place of employment. Failure may mean the end of a relationship. Sometimes failure means the end of the line.

But it doesn't always mean the end of the line. Many times failure in one area of life opens the door for opportunities in other areas of life. One door may close, but another door will open. Thomas Edison was famous for his optimism amidst failure. He noted that failure did not discourage him because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward. One time when it was observed that he had failed in over 10,000 attempts to develop a storage battery, Edison replied with this remark: "I've not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Sometimes failure is a matter of perspective.

Peter was a man who knew a thing or two about failure. He had failed his friend and Lord Jesus miserably. The night before Jesus was crucified, Jesus predicted that all his disciples would abandon him upon his arrest. Peter refused to believe that he was capable of such an act. "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," he boldly proclaimed. But Jesus said in reply, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until three times you deny that you know me."¹

You know how that story played itself out. Jesus was arrested, and everyone ran away. But Peter followed behind in the darkness, and he waited outside the house of the high priest while Jesus was being questioned. Three times Peter was singled out as one of Jesus' followers, and three times Peter swore no knowledge of the man. Upon his third denial, the rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and looked at Peter, who realized what he had done. And Peter wept bitterly at his failure.

Days later, Peter learned that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, and then again a week later, with Thomas also present. But none of that

¹ Luke 22:33-34

changed the fact that Peter had failed his friend. And so Peter did what many people will do when they encounter failure: he returned to what he knew he could do well. "I'm going fishing," said Peter.

But something funny happened when Peter and the other disciples went fishing. Did you ever notice how in the Bible when people go fishing something strange happens? It makes you wonder what kind of bait they were using!

It was something unusual, but something eerily familiar to Peter. They fished all night long, but they caught nothing. And then Jesus (we know it's Jesus, but the others in the story still don't realize who it is) called out from the shore and told the fishermen to put their nets on the other side of the boat. And what happened? The nets were so full of fish that they couldn't even pull them onto the boats. It is at this point that John realizes who it is on the shore, and he remarks to Peter, "It is the Lord!", and Peter responds by grabbing his clothes and jumping into the water and swimming ashore to be with Jesus.

But this was more than just another miraculous fishing story. It was Jesus' way of telling Peter he could start over again. It was Jesus' way of telling Peter he had another chance.

You see, the first time Peter went fishing with Jesus, Peter had just finished a night of empty nets. And yet when Jesus told Peter to put his nets out again, Peter did so and caught a miraculous catch. Then when Peter realized he was in the presence of the Son of God, he fell to his knees in fear. Jesus told him, "Do not worry. From now on you will catch people."² And so Peter followed Jesus. Only, we know how that ended up, with Peter failing miserably.

But now here was the same scenario being played out all over again. Once again it began with a fruitless night of fishing. Once again there was a miraculous catch at the instruction of Jesus. Once again Peter responded with enthusiasm. And again, Jesus will offer these words of invitation to Peter: Follow me.

Can it really be happening again?! Was Jesus, who had been so utterly betrayed by Peter, once again inviting Peter to participate in his ministry to the world? Is that really the way the forgiveness of God works? Can it be that the forgiveness that our Lord extends is so thorough and complete, that it really is possible to start all over again? What kind of patience, what kind of love is willing to say to you and to me, "Let's give this another chance"?

You see, Jesus is the one who gives us another chance. Jesus is the one who will not let our failures shut the door on abundant life. Jesus is the one who refuses to allow our weakness separate us from his love. Jesus is the one who gives us another chance. That's what the resurrection is all about—it is about the fact that our failures and our weaknesses aren't the end of the line for us. The resurrection is about the promise that you and I get another chance to follow Jesus and live a life in which our failures and our weaknesses are redeemed and transformed into something new, something great.

Only now, on this side of Easter, on this side of our journey with Jesus and the disciples, Jesus wants us to think about what it takes to follow him. You may notice that this time there is a delay between the emotional response of Peter to the miraculous catch of fish, and Jesus' invitation to follow him. There is time for breakfast, for Peter and the disciples to calm down and reflect on what has just happened.

And there is time for Jesus and Peter to have a heart-to-heart conversation.

² See Luke 5:1-11 for this version of the calling of Peter

After breakfast around the campfire, Jesus pulled Peter aside and asked him three times, “Do you love me?”, to which Peter replied each time with increasing sincerity, “Of course I do.” And three times Jesus replied to Peter with some variation of the same command: “Feed / Tend / Take care of my sheep.”

There are two things going on here. The first relates to Peter’s denial of Christ. Three times Peter denied his Lord. And now three times Peter is given the opportunity to declare his love for Jesus. Jesus is giving Peter the chance to, in the words of one commentator, “fill the hole he has dug for himself with three huge shovelfuls of love.”³

But there is more to it than just a threefold reconciliation of three egregious offenses. It is also a challenge for Peter to consider carefully the depth of commitment that Jesus is calling him to make. If Peter’s going to take advantage of this second chance, then he needs to think about what is involved before he accepts another invitation to follow Jesus. And there are at least three things to think about. Three things that Peter must consider, but even more, three things that you and I must consider.

The first thing we must consider is whether or not our decision to follow Jesus is borne out of love. “Do you love me more than these?”, Jesus asked Peter. “Do you love me more than you love these other disciples? Do you love me more than you love your boat and your net? Do you love me more than you love your way of life? Is there anything that you love more than me?” You see, Jesus wants our all. A decision to follow Jesus is something to which we must commit with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. If we are going to follow Jesus, if we are going to journey with Jesus throughout our lives, then Jesus wants that commitment to be established by our love for him. As you and I listen to Jesus’ call to us, we must be ready to answer in the affirmative his primary question for us: Do you love me?

The second thing we need to realize is that the call to follow Jesus is always a call to action. Jesus wasn’t satisfied with Peter simply professing his love for Jesus. Jesus reminds us that our love for him will necessarily result in more than words. “If you love me, feed my sheep,” he tells Peter and you and me. “Care for my people, tend to their needs, have compassion for the weak and powerless ones.” The call to discipleship is not simply for our own benefit—it is for the purpose of sharing with others the same love that we have received from the hand of God.

And the third thing we need to consider before we answer Jesus’ invitation to follow him, is that the call to follow Jesus is a call to self-sacrifice and obedience. Jesus noted that previously Peter went wherever he wanted to go and did whatever he wanted to do. But now, said Jesus, Peter will not be in control of where he goes and what he does; in fact, for Peter the journey of discipleship will take him down a road that leads to persecution and death.

The truth is, none of us knows what lies ahead in our lives. But if we choose to follow Jesus, we must be willing to go wherever he leads us in life. If we choose to follow Jesus then life will no longer be dictated by your agenda or my agenda (and in fact it never has been), but instead the path of our lives will be determined by our discernment and obedience to the will of our Lord. We are called to lives that are no longer our own.

And so now here we are, two weeks after basking in the glory of Easter. But during these weeks we do well to ask ourselves, “What do we do on this side of the resurrection?” I would submit to you that you ask consider three questions before considering the fourth: What do you say when Jesus asks you, Do

³ James G. Somerville, “Encore,” The Christian Century, April 15, 1998, p. 395.

you love me? What will you do when you hear him call you to feed his sheep? And are you willing to put the control of your lives into Jesus' hand, to be led wherever Jesus will take you?

If you are willing to answer these questions in the affirmative, then—and only then—should you consider his invitation: Follow me.

Amen.