

Life in Christ: Failure and Forgiveness
John 21:1-14
Sunday, April 22, 2018
Wheatland Presbyterian Church
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

I would guess that all of us here this morning are dealing with some type of failure in our past or present – professional failures, family failures, financial failures, etc. Our stories are different. Our failures are different. But I suspect that if I asked Joe Braymer to set up a microphone down front, we could easily fill an hour or two once we got going telling stories of failures in our past and the power that these failures have over us even in the present. Well the story that we’ve just heard read to us from John 21 has as *its* backdrop the story of an epic failure of the main character in John 21 - Simon Peter.¹ In John 18, which I’ve put a few relevant verses of for us to see on the inside cover of your order of worship, we get John’s account of Peter’s denial of Jesus. It was a spectacular collapse. Peter, the Rock upon which Jesus will build his church, turns to sand that evening around the charcoal fire. And as Patrick Henry Reardon points out, it is a failure of such surprise and magnificence that all four gospels record it and have made it to stand fixed forever in the memory of Christ’s Church. Peter, Chief of the Apostles, crumbled at the very moment that he predicted he would be the strongest and most faithful of all.² He had felt courage *before* in the face of danger. At Jesus’ arrest. with one sword Peter attacked an entire cohort of Roman soldiers and managed to remove an ear from a guy named Malchus. Not exactly a winning blow, but he had acted bravely against the odds. Just

¹ Peter is listed first in verse 2. He is the initiator of the failed fishing expedition. And he is the one that Jesus is interacting with and restoring in the whole of the chapter.

² Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29; John 13:37

hours before his failure Peter was bold and brave and daring as a follower of Jesus. And then the full darkness of the cold night settled in on him in that courtyard. And Peter publicly denied his Lord. Three separate times. How could something like this have happened? I'm certain that Peter himself couldn't even explain it. But there it was. Something deep in his heart that he didn't even know was there had been squeezed out of him in a moment of fear and panic. And now everybody knew.

Here's the thing about a memory like that. It punches you in the gut every time you experience it. I can't help but think that Peter kept hearing over and over again the words Jesus spoke directly to the Twelve when he gathered them around him and gave them instructions as he sent them out to do the work of the Kingdom: "Whoever denies me before people, I will deny before my Father who is in heaven."³ Oof! That has to be haunting Peter. Now it's not as if Peter has been fully cut out of the picture. In Mark's account of the resurrection, the angel tells the ladies at the tomb that Jesus is risen and has them go back and tell the disciples *and* Peter that he will see them in Galilee.⁴ And of course this is why they are even here at the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee in the first place. Peter hasn't completely given up. But I assure you that the memory of his epic failure was eroding his spirit, bit by bit, day by day. We don't have any reason to believe that Peter was not there when Jesus re-commissioned the disciples in the last chapter. In fact, it seems certain from the text that Peter *was* there when Thomas was personally restored from his

³ Matthew 10:33

⁴ Is Peter still a disciple at this point? Why in Mark's gospel does the angel feel it necessary to include Peter's name? Is this a clue that he's quit the 'fisher of men' business at this point and so in Jn. 21 truly is going back to a life of commercial fishing?

own struggle with unbelief that Keith spoke about last Sunday. Not only was Peter there watching, but I have to imagine he was wondering why in the world Jesus didn't address what was for Peter the elephant in the room – his own unbelief and three-fold denial of Jesus around that charcoal fire the night Jesus was arrested?

It's interesting to note what others have observed about this last chapter of John. And that is this, that John 21 has the feel of an epilogue. You get to the end of John 20 and you read verses 30-31 and you think to yourself, "That is a perfect end to John's gospel" **[30-31]**. But chapter 21 is doing something incredibly important for us as followers of Jesus. In fact as we close out these final two sermons from John's Gospel, we will do so with what you might think of as a 2-part biography on Simon Peter's restoration. And while there is a lot going on in this chapter that we could talk about, I want to approach it this way because I find it a fitting and necessary conclusion for us as we wrestle with our own failure as followers of Jesus. In these first 14 verses of John 21, I want to suggest that we are given a challenging but comforting glimpse into how Jesus responds in the face of *our* failures as *we* become those earnest but failing followers of Jesus.

Now a lot of ink has been spilled from the pens of scholars trying to decide exactly why Peter leads the disciples back out on a fishing expedition. You know me well enough to know that all my sympathies lay with Peter. As a lover of the sea and as a fisherman myself, I like Peter's instincts. I have a feeling Peter was simply doing what he knows best while he waits for Jesus to meet them in Galilee and in the meantime he's hoping he can stop playing over and over in his head that scene from around the fire the other night in the courtyard of the high priest. Nothing can help

calm the mind like exhausting physical labor out in the open air. But Jesus knows that a successful fishing trip isn't what Peter needs at this point. He in fact needs to be reminded that his only hope is still with the One he denied. And that despite what Peter is believing about himself in these days, Jesus has not given up on him. And so their evening on the lake is a bust. Verse three says, "They went out, got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing." Again, John is using the idea of night to communicate despair and hopelessness. It doesn't really matter if we ever figure out exactly why Peter went fishing (was he giving up his life as a disciple or just trying to bring some measure of order to the chaos of the last two weeks?). John tells us all we need to know when he says Peter fished at night. Whatever he had in mind, his personal state was one of despair and hopelessness. And then, of course, just as day was breaking, Jesus shows up on the shore. And the question he asks them is blunted a little bit in the English. The Greek grammar makes it sound more like this, "Children, you don't have any fish, do you?" I recognize that tone. I think I've heard Terilyn take it with me after I've spent gas money, bait money, and a whole day from sun-up to sun-down out on the ocean trying to catch fish. But Jesus then tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, they do, and of course you know the rest of the story. They are not able to even pull the net into the boat because there are so many fish in the net. Instead the best they can do is simply hang on to the net and drag it behind the boat back toward the shore. And John, the beloved disciple, is quickly putting things together. He's beginning to understand this darkness and light business. It dawns on him that it must not simply be coincidence that a stranger shows up at daybreak, in the middle of their failure, and provides

abundance that they could not imagine. And suddenly he remembers another night a number of years ago, even back before they were disciples of this Jesus, when he and his brother James and Peter – all partners in a fishing business – worked all night and caught nothing. That story is found in Luke 5:1-11. The similarities are uncanny. Same lake. Same guys. Same time (night). Same result (no fish). And then Jesus shows up tells them to go back out to where its deep and let down their nets and they catch a large number of fish. But here’s where, at least to me, it gets really interesting. This story in Luke 5 is the story where Jesus personally calls Peter, James, and John to be his disciples. All those years ago, Jesus told Peter in Luke 5:10 “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And verse 11 says, “And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” Are you beginning to see what I’m seeing? Jesus comes to his disciples, especially to Peter, and recreates and reiterates his first call. This is Jesus’ response to Peter’s dismal failure. And now back in our text this morning when John puts all this together, he turns to Peter, and he says, “It is the Lord!” And Peter must put it all together then as well, which for me explains his next move. Peter does not, cannot wait for the boat to make it back to shore. He puts his outer clothes back on and jumps into the shallows and does a hundred yard dash back to Jesus.⁵ And lo and behold, what does he discover on shore? Verse 9 tells us it’s another charcoal fire. Many scholars have pointed out that there are only two places in the entire New Testament where the Greek word *anthrakia*, meaning charcoal fire, appears. First in

⁵ I wish we had time this morning so I could tell you a story about the time I, like Peter, had to strip down to the bare essentials on a fishing trip. But that may be more Adult Sunday Class material.

John 18:18 and here in John 21:9. Just when Peter comes rushing back to Jesus in his impetuous way, he finds Jesus waiting for him with a stark reminder of his denial and betrayal.

I want you to try and grasp just a little bit of how Peter might feel. Let's say that Peter understands from the large catch of fish in their nets, what I've just described, that Jesus is not finished with him yet: that this whole scene is a recreation of his very first invitation to follow Jesus; that Jesus still loves him and still calls him to be his disciple. And after seeing Jesus restore Thomas' faith the last time the disciples saw him, Peter is coming to believe that this miraculous catch is just for him; that this miraculous haul of fish is Jesus's way of saying, "Peter, bro, we're cool." And as he drags himself up onto the shore dripping wet, Jesus has him come dry out and warm up and even share a meal with him around a *charcoal fire*. Ouch! It had to have been intentional. John, the writer of this gospel certainly thought so. Jesus didn't just use some old sticks he found laying on the beach. Jesus brought along breakfast and his own charcoal with him to cook it on.

Scientists tell us that the sense of smell, more than sight or sound or even touch is the strongest sense that we possess for evoking memories. But you didn't need a scientist to tell you that. You only need to get a whiff of freshly cut grass, rain on the pavement in the middle of a hot summer day, or a pot roast in a slow cooker on a cold winter evening to be transported back to moments in your childhood when life seemed perfect. For me the smell of diesel engines always takes me immediately back to Indian River Inlet and the thrill of roaring out of the bay and into the wide open ocean on my grandfather's fishing boat. When Jesus invites a wet

and shivering Peter to come dry out and warm up around a charcoal fire, he was bringing Peter right back to the place of his greatest failure.

Kids, have you ever done something embarrassing in public and you feel like that's all people will ever be able to think about you? Terilyn remembers when she was a little girl at that awkward age of 12 (sorry 12 year-olds, life can be pretty awkward for you and we just may as well be honest about it) and she was given a ride home from school by another family. Just before arriving where she was to be dropped of Terilyn vomited all over the inside their car. Now they were very sweet about it, but Terilyn felt awful. I mean she felt better after vomiting. But then she felt awful about the seats and carpet and all. And she was pretty embarrassed about the whole thing. Now kids, what if the next week when Terilyn came out of school to get a ride home this lady pulls up in the the car wearing safety goggles and a rain coat with the hood tied tightly. And what if when the lady opened the back door for Terilyn to get inside, that on the seat where TL is supposed to sit were a roll of paper towels, a can of Lysol disinfectant, and two barf bags? That would be just mean. Funny. But mean. Not at all sensitive to the real shame and embarrassment that Terilyn was carrying with her from last week's vomit-fest.

I think is how Peter might have experienced that charcoal fire on the beach that morning after a long night of fishing. But know that Jesus is *not* taunting Peter, using Peter's failure as leverage over him. But neither is Jesus willing to just move on as if nothing has happened. That doesn't deal with Peter's deep seated shame and fear from his failure. Jesus reveals himself to Peter on the beach over breakfast as the One who knows exactly what it is that brings him the deepest shame. And Jesus

responds to that failure by sitting with Peter over a shared meal cooked on a charcoal fire. You see, Jesus isn't simply showing up to prove he's not dead. He is there on the beach to heal, forgive, and restore Peter for the call that, yes, he's failed so miserably at almost before he's even begun. Jesus is there to bring him right back to the moment of his greatest failure. But he does this by sitting down to a meal that he has provided for him, cooked for him over a charcoal fire, something that represents his deepest pain.

I think it is important to acknowledge this morning that typically *we* are the ones running from our failures. Jesus is not nearly so frightened of them as we are. He will use them to do wonderful things for us, like start the process of freeing us from our shame and despair. Psalm 103 helpfully reminds us that God knows our frame – that is, God knows intimately the ways in which you are uniquely put together, failures and all. *He* remembers that we are dust. *We* are the ones who are so quick to forget. But Jesus has come to remind and restore Peter. Jesus brings Peter right back to the very moment of his betrayal and unraveling around this charcoal fire. Not to shame or humiliate him, but to transform him. Jesus is exposing Peter's greatest wound in order to do the excruciatingly painful work of cleaning it up so that it will heal. Jesus is setting properly that broken bone so that it might grow straight and strong and bear up under the rigorous strain of life as a disciple. We will see next week just how Jesus will do that even more deeply and comprehensively. But for this morning, I think it is enough to ask you this - where are the places of your failure? What are the tokens of your deepest shame? Where are you in desperate need of healing and restoration? Life in Christ, life as a

follower of Jesus is not about perfection, it's about honesty, dependence, repentance, and forgiveness. All of these we will see Jesus do for Peter – this man who was certain because of his betrayal and denial that he could never be acknowledged before the face of God again. But Jesus comes to the darkness of Peter's nightmare with light and grace and forgiveness... and breakfast. What lies is your shame telling you about the love of God?

John, the beloved disciple, is the one who turns to Peter and tells him that the man on the beach is actually the risen Lord who is calling him again. And I think in one sense that this church, this body of people covenanted to God and to one another do that very same thing for each other. It's the place where we point each other to the restoring and healing love of Jesus, especially in the face of all our failures and denials. This congregation is the place where we share a meal of forgiveness and restoration; never with the sense that we've earned it, but always and only because Jesus has graciously provided it for us.⁶ We've received new members this morning, I hope that you know that this is not because they are winners. They are perfectly lovely people and I'm thrilled that they are joining us. We need all of their energy and vision and sacrifice. But they were not received as members because they are winners. They are joining with a solemn pledge to live among us earnestly pointing us to the love of Christ when we are failing and to find us doing that very same thing for them in their own weakness and failure. This is a place where betrayers and deniers find restoration. This is a place where the hopeless and despairing find life and light again. And not because of anything special

⁶ Although there is not time in the context of this sermon, it would be rich to spend time with the Eucharistic theology implicit in this passage.

that we are or do. But because we belong to the One who pursues us to the very deepest places of our failure to forgive and heal and restore. May God do that in us, and through us by his gracious Holy Spirit. And may the Spirit give us the courage to follow him there. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray.