

Acts 9:1-20
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21:1-19
Psalm 30

The Third Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
May 1, 2022
The Rev. Karen Haig

Second Chances

Well, my dears, as the New Zealand prayer book says what has been done has been done. What has not been done has not been done. Let it be. No do-overs or second chances next week, no rehearsing the things done and left undone... when I leave church today, it will be for four months, and I hope I have given you the information, love and support you need to make these next four months a great sabbatical delight.

While I would never, ever compare myself with Jesus, I do have a newfound understanding of what he may have felt like as he handed over the work he had begun, to his followers. The work of getting ready to take leave is very particular, and not merely a tidy wrap-up of the stuff we do every day or week or month. Like Jesus, I have a strong desire to share lots of information, to give you everything you will need so my absence doesn't cause hardship. Don't misunderstand me, I know you are the church and that you did very well before I got here and will do very well when I leave – I have all the confidence in the world about that. And still, I want my departure to be a gift for you. My hope is that in your sabbatical time you will have an increased sense of connection, belonging and purpose as you take the reins of the church absent your rector during these next four months.

I think that's what Jesus wanted for his disciples – connection, belonging and purpose, and I think that is much of what this story is about. While you might not realize it at first hearing, this is a call story, and it harkens back to the way Jesus first called the disciples... fishermen fishing, the reference to Galilee, gathering everyone together, the words "Follow me." Only this time, Jesus is risen, he's preparing to ascend to the Father, and the meaning of discipleship is shifting as the disciples are no longer being called to follow Jesus around in the world. The way the disciples will follow Jesus now, is to be his presence out in the world. Discipleship looks different on the other side of the resurrection.

I wonder what Peter was thinking when he decided to go fishing that night? He and the other disciples had all seen the risen Christ. Jesus had breathed the Holy Spirit on them and sent them out into the world with the power, his power to bind and to loose, to forgive the sins of God's people. But Peter has decided to go fishing instead. I get that. Their worlds had turned upside down when Jesus died and turned upside down every time he reappeared too. We might think there would be unspeakable joy at seeing the risen Christ, but that isn't necessarily the disciple's response. Today their response is to go fishing. In the midst of fear and heartache and confusion, it's probably best to try to get back to normal. But nothing was normal, and after a brutal night of fishing for nothing they were about to give up.

But then a stranger showed up on the beach at dawn – dawn is the hour of resurrection, you know, and the stranger said “Why don’t you try something different? Cast your nets on the other side of the boat.” And so they did. When the beloved disciple John saw the net full of fish, he knew the stranger was Jesus and said so to Peter. And Peter, being Peter, totally forgot about the 153 fish, jumped in the water and headed straight for Jesus who was cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire.

Peter’s impulsiveness only got him soaking wet this time. But his impulsiveness had gotten him into a very bad place not long ago. It was the last time he’d been standing around a charcoal fire, warming himself in the high priest’s courtyard. The guard asked him if he was one of Jesus’ disciples. “I am not” was what he’d said. Someone else asked him again and again he said “I am not.” And then someone who had seen him in the garden with Jesus said so, and Peter once again denied knowing Jesus. That shameful night he’d been huddled around a charcoal fire might well have come rushing back to him as he ran toward Jesus and the smell of his charcoal fire. I can only imagine the pit in his stomach as he remembered his promise to die with Jesus before he would ever deny him, and the three denials that followed.

It's all so complicated. Jesus dead, Jesus risen. Shock and grief and the end of everything that mattered, then the risen Christ cooking you breakfast. Fear, guilt and shame, then trying to forget it all by going back to anything that brings comfort – like fishing. But Peter can’t avoid his shame any more than we can. Shame demands our attention, turns us against ourselves and ultimately turns us against everyone else as we begin to shame others in an effort to assuage our own guilt. Shame isn’t something we can fix. It is only something to be loved back into kindness and self-compassion.

And that’s what Jesus did. It’s what Jesus always does. He didn’t pretend Peter hadn’t denied him. He didn’t pretend those denials didn’t matter. He didn’t forgive and forget. And, he didn’t avoid the issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus knew Peter’s guilt and shame were festering inside him, so Jesus took Peter right back to the heart of his shame by asking him a question three times over. But the question Jesus asked was a question that builds up rather than tears down, a question that brought Peter back into the fold and gave him new life and purpose. In this simple question, asked three times, there is healing, reconciliation and deep and abiding love.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Yes, you know I do.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Yes, you know I do.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? You know everything. So you know that I love you.

Three denials, and three opportunities to acknowledge the wrong he had done, not for the purpose of shaming, but for the opportunity to take in the reality that Jesus really does know what is in our hearts...

Almighty God to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid...¹

And what Jesus knew of Peter's heart was that Peter loved him. That's what allowed Peter to be reconciled with Jesus. Even though Peter had denied knowing Jesus and denied him three times, he loved Jesus. And by asking his question, Jesus was telling Peter he knew of his love, which allowed Peter to belong to Jesus and his kingdom once again.

Belonging is so powerful, isn't it? I'm guessing most of us can think of a time when we didn't fit in, couldn't find our place, felt alone or uncertain. Our sense of belonging has a lot to do with our identities. That may seem backward in a culture that says if we're worth anything, it's because we've made ourselves into something worthwhile. Being a "self-made" person in our culture is highly esteemed. But where we really find our identities, is in relationship – relationship with God and relationship with each other. Our identity is much comprised of what people reflect back to us about who we are. That's one of the reasons it is so hard to lose someone we love... we don't only lose them, we lose the part of ourselves that person saw and loved and reflected for us. When Jesus offered Peter three opportunities to proclaim his love and his faith, he was bringing Peter back into the community Peter had relinquished when he denied Jesus.

But reconciliation and belonging weren't the only things happening in that conversation. Along with welcoming Peter back into the community, Jesus gave Peter – the rock on which Jesus would build his church – his job back and gave him renewed purpose.

Feed my lambs.
Tend my sheep.
Feed my sheep.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is about to ascend to the Father, and before leaving, he commissions Peter to care for his sheep as Jesus had done throughout his ministry.

Listen:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.²

Peter has gone from fisherman to disciple to fisherman and back to disciple. But this time his discipleship is different. It is informed by the resurrection, yes. But it is also informed by his own life experience - the scorching shame and humiliation of denying Jesus, and in the face of that, the unspeakable grace of being known and loved. Both those things contributed to his renewed discipleship, and both contributed to his fuller sense of himself and his place in God's mission.

¹ Collect for Purity, Book of Common Prayer p355

² John 10:14-17

Belonging and purpose. They are as important for us as they were for the ones who were trying to bring the new way of life in Jesus Christ into the world. In our baptisms, we were brought into that new life and became a part of the body of Christ, a body that would not be complete without each one of us. In our baptisms, we are called into God's mission of reconciliation, called to love God's beloved, broken and beautiful world back into wholeness.

As it turns out, there really are second chances. Maybe not do-overs, but second chances. And third chances and seventy third chances too. That is the grace and mercy of God. And we are called to embody that grace and mercy for God's people and creation through compassion, kindness, forgiveness and a faith that believes God's love is for everyone and it's our job to make that plain. Amen.