



Sunday May 1, 2022
John 21:1-19 (Third Sunday of Easter)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

I'd like to take you on a little trip back to various points in my childhood – I'm five, eight, twelve, sixteen years old. I've been disrespectful to my mom or lied to my dad. I've ruined some new clothing item, bombed a test, lost a tool, ignored my chores, or stayed out past curfew. I've failed in some way, trivial or significant, and I've been caught. But the most painful part of these memories isn't in the discovery of my offense. It's what happens after I'm caught, after I apologize, after I'm punished and sent to my room. The darkest part is the shame.

Although I was surrounded by loving parents and siblings, I didn't grow up in a home or a community that practiced restoration. Despite my family's best intentions, we never found our way to a language of grace. We never said or heard, "I forgive you," or "It's okay," or "I still love you." Instead, we abandoned the wrongdoer among us to a deafening and damning silence. We withdrew affection to reestablish honor. We avoided eye contact, shut down all meaningful conversation, and rendered the offense and the offender invisible.

Eventually, after hours, days, or weeks – depending on the severity of the offense – the ice thawed, and life returned to a bruised normal. But a wound still festered below the surface. A disgraceful shame that filled my body and assured me that I was unfixable, unworthy, unlovable, and wrong.

This week's Gospel reading begins with shame so heavy; it makes me cringe. It begins with the disciple Peter battling his shame on a fishing boat in the Sea of Tiberias. Peter the Rock. Peter whom Jesus astounded with a miraculous catch of fish. Peter, "a fisher of men." Peter who proclaimed Jesus the Son of God before any other disciple dared to. Peter whose mother-in-law Jesus healed. Peter who walked on water. Peter who saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop. Peter who promised to stay by Jesus's side even unto death. Peter whose courage failed so catastrophically around a charcoal fire on the night Jesus was arrested that I'll bet he expected to spend the rest of his life trying to escape from that single, agonizing memory – "Hey! I saw you with Jesus! You must be one of his followers." "No. No, I'm not! I swear, I don't even know the man."

So, a confused and anguished Peter returns to his fishing boat. After all, isn't that what we all do when we're ashamed? Retreat to whatever is safe, comfortable, and familiar? Or, we choose to run impulsively and recklessly towards something – anything – that will help us feel competent and worthy again? Peter retreats to his boat, his nets, his life before Jesus. As if there's some time or place in his life where shame is not. Where his pain is not. Where Jesus is not.

But of course, there is no time or place in any of our stories where Jesus isn't. Because he's just as present in our running away and hiding as he is everywhere else. Just as loving in our failures as he is when we succeed. It's not Jesus who's hung up on drawing out our humiliation or maximizing our self-punishment. That's all on us, and it stems from our flawed understandings about who God is and what God does. Our voyeuristic obsession with other people's failures. Our need to criticize and shame other wrongdoers. Jesus doesn't have those flaws, obsessions, or needs; his desire is reconciliation, and his pleasure is grace.

But Peter doesn't know this, or at least he doesn't believe it or trust it yet. So, he spends a long night trying to catch fish without Jesus, and he fails. Dawn breaks, Jesus shows up, a miraculous catch follows the night of futility, and Peter finds himself breathless, sitting by a charcoal fire – again. Looking into the eyes of the Lord he repeatedly denied – again. Facing three costly questions – again.

What I find extraordinary about this story is the way Jesus restores Peter by returning him to the source of his shame. He doesn't wrap the humiliated disciple in a protective bubble. He doesn't avoid the hard conversation. He doesn't pretend that Peter's denials didn't happen and didn't hurt. But Jesus also doesn't preach, condemn, accuse, or retaliate. Instead, he feeds. He feeds Peter's body and then he feeds Peter's soul. He surrounds the self-doubting and self-hating disciple with tenderness and safety, inviting him to revisit his shame for the sake of healing, restoration, and commissioning. "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Feed my sheep."



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Sooner or later, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, we all learn the bitter lessons of our broken world – “heartbreak, violence, failure, betrayal, cruelty, and grief.” And as I reflect on Peter’s story, I wonder what our failures would feel like if we offered each other the same sense of safety that Jesus offers his disciple. The safety to return to the heart of our wrongdoing and despair. The safety to wrap new language around our failures. The safety to experience unconditional love amid our shame. The safety to get back up and try again.

What would the Church be like if we embodied and practiced Jesus’s version of reconciliation? What would the world be like if Christians were known as the people to run to in times of humiliation? I wonder if we, like Jesus, could become a sanctuary for all those who feel the pain, humiliation, and separation of being shamed?

Around the fire that Jesus builds, Peter’s fear and denial evolves into trust and worship – “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” In the end, Peter realizes that it’s what Jesus knows that matters. Jesus knows that we’re more than our worst failures and betrayals. He knows that we’re vulnerable to shame and self-hatred. He knows the deep places we run to and hide when we fail. And he knows how to build the fire and prepare the meal that will call and invite us back to shore. A meal of grace and welcome First Communion students will celebrate this day – a meal centered around forgiveness and love that each and every one of us are invited to share around bread and wine every Sunday.

Jesus’s appearance to Peter – like all the post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels speaks volumes about God’s priorities. In the days following the resurrection, Jesus doesn’t waste a moment on revenge or retribution. He doesn’t storm Pilate’s house, or avenge himself on Rome, or punish the soldiers whose hands drove nails into his. Instead, he spends his remaining time on earth feeding, restoring, and strengthening his friends. He calls Mary Magdalene by name as she cries. He offers his wounds to the skeptical Thomas. He grills bread and fish for his hungry disciples. He heals what’s wounded and festering between his heart and Peter’s.

Jesus focuses on relationship. On reconciliation. On love. He spends his last days before ascending to heaven liberating his children from fear, despair, self-hatred, and paralysis. He doesn’t waste any time excessively celebrating his success. Even now, in all his power and glory, he chooses humility. He chooses to linger on a lonely beach until dawn, waiting for his hungry children to realize how much they need him. He chooses to ask Peter an honest and vulnerable provoking question about denial, even though the answer might hurt. He chooses to feed and tend his sheep.

If what we’ve carried away from this gospel is the idea that the final thing to remember about Peter is his unfaithfulness, then this closing chapter reminds us that far more important than Peter’s denials is the extravagant grace of Jesus and his willingness to entrust the ministry to someone whose life so far has been marked by recklessness and denial. The conclusion to John’s gospel serves as a dramatic appeal to us not to diminish Jesus and the wonders of his ministry to a story in the past, not to leave the gospel in a time and place long ago and far away. The conclusion returns us to the enthusiasm of the opening, to the resilience and strength of God’s word.

The conclusion declares, through its story of the risen Christ on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, what the introduction declares as the story of Christ’s earthly ministry begins – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The conclusion stirs up memories of the darkness – the darkness of our hunger, the darkness of our failure to recognize or follow Jesus, the darkness of our denial – but at the same time it reminds us that none of this darkness has overcome the light. Because the risen Jesus still calls, still feeds, and still empowers those who doubt, deny, or fall short.

Peter’s shame meets the overwhelming grace of God, and God’s grace wins. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.” My friends, that’s the Gospel story in a nutshell. Jesus shows up on that shore and tells Peter, and us, “I believe in you. I know who you are, and I love you. You are exactly the disciple I need and the disciple the world needs. Feed my sheep.” Thanks be to God! Amen.