

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA  
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister  
Sunday, May 5, 2019  
Lessons: Genesis 45:4-7 and John 21:1-3,15-19

## BACK TO FISHING?

Simon Peter is just like one of us, but more so than most. He talks big, then falls short, very far short. When from the boat he recognizes Jesus, now risen from the dead, Peter can't wait for the others to row back to shore; no, he dives into the water and swims but, then, when he reaches Jesus, doesn't know what to do or say. Throughout our gospels, Peter rushes then stumbles, says just the right words but immediately spoils them with just the wrong words.

How many times have you or I looked back upon an ordinary conversation gone wrong? "Why did I say that? Why didn't I think about the other person's circumstances or feelings before blurting out something so foolish, hurtful or just blatantly irrelevant? How often have we wished we could go back in time just long enough to unsay something or else speak the words that would have been helpful? "If only . . ." Those two little words attach to so much that haunts our minds and troubles our dreams. Now that I am retired, I have plenty of time, however unwillingly, to sort through my decades-long collection of *if-only's*.

Of course, there are plenty of Facebook memes telling me just to put such memories and regrets out of my mind, as easy as that. Let the past be the past. Live today. It was all just training. Doesn't that advice sound great? And, hey, I grew up in New Jersey, where *fuggetaboutit* is actually a word, and one of the state's favorite sons sang proudly, "I did it my way." No regrets. No apologies. No looking too long in the mirror.

Simon Peter did it his way, and now he is spiritually a dead man walking – dead inside because his hopes and dreams died with Jesus, and Peter's last memory of the conclusion was his own great act of cowardice. He who had talked tough had denied three times that he had any relation to Jesus or even knew the man. His life's meaning and purpose now gone, his hopes evaporated, Peter tries to return to the old life he left to follow Jesus. He goes back to fishing, but now he doesn't even catch fish.

This Communion sermon is about the redemption of our lives. I'm not talking about getting into heaven after we die; God will take care of us and those we love, and having trusted in life the God whose love and mercy we know in Jesus Christ, we can trust our God also to bring us to the Easter morning on the other side of death. No, I'm talking about God's

redemption of the past we cannot change, about what can happen when Jesus Christ confronts our private collections of *if-only's*, of regrets about what we might have said or done and for what we are ashamed to admit even to ourselves we did. How many people try not to admit that they are disappointed with their lives? *I'm not the person I thought I would be – not the man, the woman, the husband or father, the wife or mother, the friend, the minister I thought I would be.* Who wants to say such words and face up to them? What young adult wants to admit, “I’m not headed toward anything like the future I expected”? Countless people are disappointed with their lives and, truth be told, with themselves. It’s easier in the short term not to tell ourselves that truth. So people escape into drugs, too much drinking, or too much of video games, of television, or too much even of church work.

Regret is the child of shame, and shame is probably our most painful affect, the terrible feeling life and memory make us feel. Peter liked to see himself as brave and loyal. In his mind, he was a leader, and as Jesus’ own right-hand man, he had a glorious future. No mere fisherman was he! No average Joe. He, Simon son of John, was the Rock, the rock-solid dependable man who would never fail where others failed. Then once, twice, three times a coward.

If only we could stop feeling shame and its terrible child, regret – right? No, though I detest feeling shame as much as others do, I must admit we need it, and we need to feel it when our lives require correction, discipline, and redirection. If I could hurt other people, humiliate them, even destroy them without regret, I would be nearly demonic. If I felt no shame no matter what I said or did, I would be lost.

Jesus does not undo Peter’s denials, but he does give his former disciple a rebirth of hope with a fresh call to courage and responsibility. Once, twice, three times forgiven and not merely excused but restored to the mission for which Jesus had called Peter the first time. “Simon, son of John . . .” Not Peter, the Rock – not yet. Simon must be restored to be anew any kind of solid rock for anyone. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” Peter is hurt when Jesus asks the question a third time, but it really does hurt to be forgiven. Not excused, not told it didn’t matter when it did. It mattered very much that Simon Peter denied Jesus when standing by him counted most.

Biblically, sin is denial of relationship, rejection of relatedness. “The woman you gave me, God, she made me disobey you!” says the archetypal husband Adam. “What, God, am I my brother’s keeper?” asks the prototypical murderer, Cain. Listen to our modern voices. *Who is the refugee to me? What do I care about an atheist or a Muslim? So what, she’s not my daughter, and she probably asked for it. Yeah, well he’s old, grouchy, and boring, and he’s probably a right-winger, too. Her, she’s a snowflake socialist. Well, some make it, some don’t – that’s life. No, I don’t want to care about their children; they’re not*

*like us.* Peter went to the very essence of sin by denying all relation to Jesus, but he's not alone. When we deny our shared humanity with even the stranger, we deny Jesus.

What Jesus does for his cowardly friend is crucial for all of us who stand under the cross, who come to the Lord's Table saying in effect, "Yes, I am the reason for your suffering, shame, and death. You did it for me, and you had to do it because of me." Jesus cannot undo Peter's past; he can't make it as though Peter had never denied him. Jesus can and does work with Peter to change the meaning, the significance, of that past failure, and he changes, also, its influence upon Peter himself and its effect upon Peter's future discipleship and service. So, after each reaffirmation of Peter's love and loyalty, Jesus says to him, not, "Feel better about yourself now," but, "Feed my sheep." Simon Peter's terrible weakness will now become a strength for the sake of all he will come to serve and influence toward faith and hope. Peter did what he did, but now he will not have to be the man it had made him. His failure's hold on him is broken, and he is a new person.

Would you want to share in your faith journey with someone who never doubted, never knew discouragement, never faltered? Would you want a parent or partner who was never wrong? A boss who had never made a mistake? Many a child, wife, or husband, has known the sting of the question, "Why can't you be more like . . . ?" Simon Peter is both Simon the coward and Peter the rock, the tough talker and the grateful witness to the redemptive love of Christ.

Your past cannot be undone, nor can mine, but your past and mine can be healed and redirected so that both what you have done or failed to do and what has been done to you can be redeemed. Our mistakes and our hurts can be taken up by God and turned to good, helpful, healing purposes. Shame can be turned into understanding and compassion. Having been wronged or abused can lead to bitterness, understandably, but can instead be turned toward a passion for justice tempered by mercy. None of this is easy. Peter was hurt that Jesus didn't just let it go but asked him the painful third time. But Jesus forgave him with a new three-fold call to service, making Simon anew Peter the Rock. Oh, Peter would falter again. Paul tells us about a later act of Peter's cowardice. Faith's journey really is a journey and a struggle.

We come to the Lord's Table in need of redemption in this life and for this life's call to shared ministry and service. There is no magic here, neither in the elements themselves (bread and wine) nor in the sacrament as a ritual. But coming here does set us again before the crucified Christ who redeems us for God, for each other, and, yes, for ourselves so we can live and keep growing in faith, hope, and love. No magic, but by the working of God's Spirit within and among us, something deeply and powerfully real can be reinforced here. Amen.