

“Third Chances”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 21:1-19

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 21:1-19

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, even though we crucified you, you rose from the dead and returned to us to resume the conversation. Even though we forsook you and denied you, you continued to speak to us. We gather here this morning, in church, as your disciples, because we have been convened. You sought us out as a shepherd seeks his lost sheep. You called us by our very own names, you summoned us to follow you as sheep follow their good shepherd. And that’s why we speak to you – because you have spoken to us. Give us open, expectant hearts. Open our ears to what you have to say to each of us. Enable us to hear your special word to each of us. And in hearing your word, you grant us the grace to respond to your word when we leave church and walk into the world. Amen.

Intro:

When I was young my dad and I would go fishing a couple of times during the summer on the Pee Dee River. We would drive up to the cabin near the Dillon/Marlboro County line and would just make a vacation out of it. Although for me it didn’t always seem like a vacation. We would get up real early, put the creek boat in the water, no motor/one paddle, and then.... just sit. And then after some sitting, we would sit some more. And then after some more sitting, every now and again my dad would start his casting and his reeling. He would use his rod and reel, and I well... would use a stick. A real nice stick too, mind you my dad would say. It was about a 8 foot bamboo stick that looked like it had been passed down through the Rogers family for four generations with brand new fishing line tied around it, and so if you can imagine casting for me wasn’t all that fun. I reckon Rogers fathers handed the holy bamboo stick down to their sons so as to protect themselves from any painful accidents that may come flying into their faces. Truth be told, my first time at fishing, I wasn’t a very good caster even with the holy ugly stick. It got

“Third Chances”

boring casting the way I was told. I wanted to cast like dad. I wanted to bring it all the way from Georgia and see how far I could throw that line. Now I know I'm not the first son to fishhook their father, but it sure did seem like it. I might however, be the first son to fishhook their father twice on back to back castings. Needless to say after a while I had grown embarrassed and weary of wanting to be a fisherman. “I've got better things to do with my valuable time than to sit here waiting on some creature with a brain the size of a pea to make my day,” I said. “I don't have the patience for it,” I said. “I'm no good at this.” Even after being fishhooked twice my father had patience with me and corrected my casting. On my third chance to cast he said, “follow me, like this.”

The thing that most impresses one about fishing, an aspect of the sport that stays with you know matter how long you do it, is failure. You go out at first morning light, hauling all of your gear, full of hope and expectation. You use good form in casting and presenting the bait. You work from a well-stocked box of fishing tackle. And yet, as the sun goes down that evening, you have very little to show for it. The thing about fishing is if you are going to be a fisherman, you had better get good at failure!

It's funny; I heard the exact same statement from the army chaplain at the Citadel when I wanted to go into ministry. He said, “I can assure you, if you want to do this, if you have high expectations for yourself and your ministry, then you had better get good at handling failure.”

It's a rather odd message to hear, as we walk through the Great 50 Days of Joy that the church calls Eastertide. We are presented, in the days just after Easter, a gospel lesson that is so full of failure. Easter is the joyful victory of God, not the sad defeat. And yet defeat permeates this Sunday's gospel. Gospel means good news and yet our story is full of bad news of failure.

“Third Chances”

With this Sunday’s gospel lesson we come to the very end of the Gospel of John. Failure floods every aspect of this story. First of all, there is the apparent or assumed failure of Jesus and his mission. The walk with Jesus has ended terribly. The disciples have trudged back to what they were doing before Jesus called them to be his disciples. They are fishing. Maybe they didn’t know what to do with themselves. After standing by and watching Jesus humiliatingly crucified on Friday, it’s over. Back on the road, just as the Jesus movement gained momentum, just as they had hopes that he was indeed, the anointed one, the Messiah who would redeem Israel. But Jesus had failed. You can’t fight City Hall. The people turned against us. The Romans had all of the arms. There’s nothing left for us to do, but to go back to fishing.

Maybe you think it odd that John has given us accounts of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples when they were behind locked doors (John 20). He has spoken to them, appeared to them. And what is their collective response? They have gone back to fishing! You must be a really dull person to walk away from witnessing a resurrection, to have been personally met by the risen Christ, and still go back to fishing! But honestly now, as we sit here a few Sundays after our grand celebration of the resurrection, are we much different from the disciples? And yet there fishing did not go much better for them than their discipleship. A group of disciples have been fishing all night, and they haven’t caught a thing. Their empty nets must have seemed to them like a symbol for just how they felt. Empty. Failures. Defeated.

Peter, the lead disciple, is among the group. Peter personally embodied their collective failure. Back in the upper room, Peter had promised to remain steadfast and to stand with Jesus, even when the going got tough. Well, you know how long that lasted. Peter ended up denying Jesus three times and breaking down in tears at the failure of his resolve.

“Third Chances”

Note that when Peter denied Jesus, in the courtyard in the middle of the night, when the maid had questioned him, Peter was not so much denying Jesus as denying that he was a disciple. And to be sure, with his repeated denials, he certainly doesn't act much like a disciple. But now, here at the end, Jesus comes to Peter, seeks him out and re-calls him. Even as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus calls him three times, calls him to love him and then commissions him, giving him the assignment of feeding his beloved sheep. In spite of Peter's past failure, Jesus puts Peter in charge of his flock, asking him to attend, feed, and keep the sheep of Jesus's pasture.

Peter denied Jesus three times back in that dark twilight of that dark Friday. Now, three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” And three times Peter answers in the affirmative.

Yes! Yes! Yes I love you!

I don't think Jesus is so much quizzing Peter as repeating his question in order to reassure him. When he asks, “Do you love me?” Jesus seems confident that the answer is “Yes!” Though Peter has disappointed himself and his Lord and failed at being the perfect disciple, nevertheless his love for Jesus is sure. *Just because you dearly love Jesus, that doesn't mean that you will never disappoint yourself or disappoint Jesus.*

Yet the important thing is that Jesus returns to Peter, engages him, and commissions him. Our gospel lesson concludes with a curious prediction of Peter's death. One day Peter, the one who had once denied his Lord, and then the one who was forgiven and re-called to be a disciple by his Lord, would eventually die for his Lord. Peter, the failure, the one who was charged by Jesus with tending the sheep (who were also failures), would succeed as a martyr, that is, as a witness to Christ. Peter would prove, in the end, completely steadfast and faithful to Jesus' invitation, “Follow me!”

“Third Chances”

Easter with Jesus, the days after the resurrection, is not simply moving with Jesus into eternity, and not primarily Jesus taking us into eternity. Easter with Jesus concludes those words ringing in our ears, “Follow me.” I think there’s a lesson here for us in this account of Jesus breakfasting with the disciples on the beach. Sorry, if you thought Easter and the risen Christ meant that Jesus has erased all discouragement, frustration and failure from the world and from our lives. Still, even after Easter, even after the resurrected Christ comes and stands right in front of us, it’s still possible to misunderstand, to fall away, to allow the everydayness of life, the dull, reassuring routine, to overcome our joy at the miracle of Easter.

And yet the good news is that Jesus does not let us be. He comes to us where we are, seeks us out amidst the dull, numbing routine of everyday life. There he speaks to us, reassures us and once again calls to us, “Follow me.”

Jesus will not let us walk away from him or his resurrection, shrug our shoulders and go back to our everyday routine. He comes to us. The risen Christ appears. He not only appears to us, but he also calls to us. He assigns us his work to do. “Feed my sheep” could be interpreted in a number of ways. I think that’s how Christ’s vocation is. What he expects you to do varies with each of us, but each of us is here under his invitation, his command, “Follow me!”

I hope that in your times of failure, when you aren’t the follower of Jesus, I hope that you intend to be. When believing in Jesus is difficult for you, or when you are disappointed by the results of your labors, or facing some failure in your own ministry, that you will remember this story, this post-Easter story and take heart.

Our failure does not negate his vocation. Even in our failures to follow, he keeps showing up to us in our ordinary lives fishhooking us to himself, he keeps encouraging us, and keeps saying to us, even us, on our third, fourth, fifth, quadrillionth chance, “Like this, Follow me!”

“Third Chances”

Let us pray:

God of victory over death,
your Son revealed himself again and again,
and convinced his followers of his glorious resurrection.
Grant that we may know his risen presence,
in love obediently feed his sheep,
and care for the lambs of his flock,
until we join the hosts of heaven in worshiping you and praising him
who is worthy of blessing and honor,
glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.

“Third Chances”

Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.¹

Offertory Prayer

Mighty God of Resurrection Power: You offer us life that overcomes death, light that overcomes darkness, hope that overcomes our deepest despair! What could we possibly offer in return? Our tithes and gifts, yes; but our minds, hearts, and bodies, as well. May our minds be about understanding who you are and who you long for us to be in this world. May our hearts overflow with your love and compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten. May our bodies carry us out of the tombs of isolation to engage our neighbors as sisters and brothers. May the “Alleluias!” we offer leave this place with us to bring hope to everyone we meet! In the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>