

Grief to Joy: The God of Second Chances
John 21
May 15, 2022

Did you ever wish you could have a do-over, a chance to turn back the clock and try it again? In a moment of pressure or thoughtlessness you said or did something that you deeply regret and wish you could erase from the public record.

Some of these do-over moments are short-lived, we regret them for a day or so and then forget about them. But sometimes the words we spoke or the actions we took are so significant that they change how we view ourselves and maybe even the trajectory of our lives.

The 21st chapter of John is kind of like an epilogue, or a Marvel Movie post credits scene. John wraps up chapter 20 with these words:

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The End. Fade to black. Roll credits.

But then, just as you are ready to stand up and leave the theater a new scene appears on the screen, one that answers some of the questions people had when John wrote this gospel. One of those questions had to do with Peter.

I thought the best way to do this would be to follow the pattern of the last few months and just immerse ourselves in the text. Let's engage it and see what the Lord might have for us through it.

But before we get there, we need to remind ourselves of some earlier scenes, memories that Peter carried.

What were some of the elements Peter experienced when Jesus first called him to follow? If you need it, see Luke 5:1-11 for some hints. (fishing all night, caught nothing, Jesus sent them out to cast their nets again, huge catch of fish, Peter confessed he was a sinful man, Jesus called him to follow).

Of all the things less than perfect things Peter did—from not being able to sustain walking on water, to hearing Jesus publicly rebuke him to cutting off Malchus' ear in the garden, and all the other things he did—what do you think is the one thing he did that he regretted most? (Denying the Lord three times, when Jesus needed him the most.)

He went out and wept bitterly after this. This event changed the way he viewed himself and his life.

I think we need to add one more detail to Peter's experiences. We all know that aromas can trigger some strong memories. The first time I cut my lawn on Pathway Lane I came to a section of grass that had ivy growing through it. I didn't think much of it, but when it was cut it sent out an aroma that had me stop and turn off the engine. Suddenly, I was a little boy playing under the big tree in my grandparent's back yard, a yard that was covered with this ivy. I hadn't thought of this in decades.

Smells are powerful and when combined with a visual element they can dominate our thoughts. Peter denied the Lord in the early morning hours. There was a chill in the air so Peter gathered with those who had just arrested Jesus, and warmed himself beside their charcoal fire. After the rooster crowed, Jesus looked right at Peter and Peter ran out to weep bitterly.

When we smell burning charcoal we might think of picnics, but Peter would likely make a different connection to that aroma.

With these scenes in mind, let's read the text together. I will make comment along the way. John 21.

Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. ² Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

³ Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." "We'll come, too," they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.

We don't know why Peter wanted to go fishing. But did you notice the definite article in front of the boat? They didn't get into a boat, they got into *the* boat. Whose boat was it? Was Peter feeling so badly about failing as a disciple that he wanted to go back to the one thing he knew he could do? Was this *his* familiar boat and gear?ⁱ

They fished all night and caught nothing. The sun was rising as the stars began to disappear from the eastern sky. There was enough light to make out the shoreline but not yet enough to clearly see details.

⁴ At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who he was.

⁵ He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?" "No," they replied.

⁶ Then he said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.

⁷ Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into

the water, and headed to shore. ⁸ The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. ⁹ When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread.

It was early morning. There was a chill in the air as cold, wet Peter approached the familiar smell and warmth of burning charcoal. At some point he and Jesus made eye contact. The sights. The smells. It was all so painfully familiar.

Jesus was a gracious host who had prepared a meal that He was going to share with His disciples. Eating together was the highest form of communion and connection. By His actions Jesus was reassuring His disciples that He was still willing to share deeply with them, but for Peter, all the circumstances pointed to his one major failure.

¹⁰ “Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn.

¹² “Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. ¹⁴ This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

When we add this story to the other gospel accounts this is about the seventh post-resurrection appearance, but John says this was the third appearance that He gave to His disciples (as a group). And this is where it gets really interesting.

Notice the use of Peter’s formal name. This is like a pastor using your formal name just before your wedding vows or a judge using your formal name just before announcing a verdict. I think Jesus was getting Peter’s attention.

¹⁵ After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

I always think of Jesus sweeping his hand toward something when He said, “more than these.” But to what did He refer? It is possible that Jesus was pointing to the boat, the nets and the huge haul of fish. Peter had gone back to fishing. “Simon son of John, do you love me more than your vocation and the comfort of familiarity?” It might be that.

But then again, at the Last Supper Peter confidently declared how all the other disciples might desert Jesus but he never would. That’s just another way of saying, “I love you more than they do.” Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these men do?”ⁱⁱ

We don’t know his point of reference, but Peter knew.

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you." "Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him.

¹⁶ Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you." "Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

¹⁷ A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep."

Jesus asked three times. One for each of Peter's denials. This is not coincidental.

There may also be something to note in the words for love John used here. The first two times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you *agape* me?" Do you love me with the highest form of love, willing to give to me even at cost to you?

And every time Peter answered, "Yes Lord, you know I *phileo* you." You know I love you as a friend and I will be there for you as a brother. Gone now were Peter's grand statements of his devotion to Jesus. His denials had humbled him and given him a realistic assessment of himself.

J.B. Phillips translates it this way:

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others?" "Yes, Lord," he replied, "you know that I am your friend."

¹⁶ "Then feed my lambs," returned Jesus. Then he said for the second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," returned Peter. "You know that I am your friend."

¹⁷ "Then care for my sheep," replied Jesus. Then for the third time, Jesus spoke to him and said, "Simon, son of John, are you my friend?" [This is the one place where Jesus changed to word to *phileo*.] Peter was deeply hurt because Jesus' third question to him was "Are you my friend?", and he said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I am your friend!"

¹⁸ "Then feed my sheep," Jesus said to him.

Like it was the first time Jesus called him to follow, Peter was bringing himself in full honesty to Jesus. "I am not the best one in the bunch. I am a sinful man, but you have my heart, at least as much of it as I can understand. I love you but have nothing I can parade in my favor before you. You know everything, Lord. You know I am your friend."

When Jesus is invited in and we are honest with Him, He uses our failures to break us so that He might remake us.

And do you see the power of this? Jesus accepts him as he is and where he is. Whether the love is perfect and complete or faulty and growing the call is the same—feed my lambs. Jesus is saying, “I still want to be with you and I still trust you to serve me well.”

From here Jesus goes on to tell Peter how he will glorify God and will one day be executed for his faith. Peter asks about what will happen with John and Jesus tells him not to worry about the plan God has for other people. Follow without regard for how others may be doing it.

Jesus said to Peter, “As for you, follow me.”

In many and various ways, we all fail our Lord. John 21 gives us the assurance that our God is a do-over God, a God of second, third and even fiftieth chances. He does not hold on to a grudge or respond to us based on the thing we did twenty years ago. When we ask Him for forgiveness, He gives it to us fully so if He is not holding on to our failures, then neither should we.

When we bring our failures and regrets to Jesus, He uses them to form us into people of greater humility and deeper faithfulness, but that encounter will always carry pain.

Peter was hurt when Jesus asked him the third time, do you love me? I don’t know the reason for that pain, but I do know that anytime a dislocated joint is popped back into place, there is pain and that pain is necessary if the joint is to regain strength and health. Don’t be afraid of the pain; it is part of the healing.

Climb into your imagination with me for a moment. It is a beautiful day, the kind of day that you would call perfect. You are out in the middle of a field and Jesus is sitting with you, sharing a picnic meal of your favorite foods.

Surrounding you are all the things you hold as important. There is your family, your vocation, your possessions, your health, your recreational activities, the things you love to do. Your status, your authority and your power to control. For some, the feeling of being successful is here; for others, the feeling of being a failure is here. These are the things we hold on to and don’t want to surrender.

Now, imagine Jesus looking at you with a gentle and loving expression on His face. As He speaks your formal name, He sweeps His hand toward something in the field and asks, “Do you love me more than these?”

What is He pointing to? Can you identify the things you are holding onto more tightly than Jesus?

Knowing that He fully accepts you and loves you as you are, let Him know your answer. Be truthful with yourself and with Him. He knows you fully so don’t pretend to be someone you aren’t. That might mean your best answer at this point is “I don’t know.”

Whatever your answer, whisper it to Him. As you do be aware of the emotions you feel. What do you feel? The more you know Jesus the more your shame and guilt are replaced by acceptance, forgiveness and love.

As you speak to Him, take a moment to listen. I think you will hear Him affirm His love for you and trust in you as He says to you the same thing He said to Peter. "Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep."

Some of His lambs are not yet in His flock...share the good news with them. Some of those lambs are in the flock but are malnourished, bring to them the solid food they need.

These lambs are in your family, they in your neighborhood, they are in this congregation, they are in your existing network of relationships and they are in the generations that come behind us—the Next Generation that needs mentors who will come alongside and feed these dear lambs.

Be it little or great, take the love and faith you have and feed His sheep. Don't worry about what the Lord will do in and through others. Don't let yourself get sidetracked by all the beautiful things in your life. As for you, follow Him with who you are and what you have today. He will do the rest.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I am struck by how chapter 20 concludes with the call to believe. No matter who we are, we can find life in Jesus. And chapter 21 concludes with the call to follow. No matter how badly or how often we've messed up, you love us, you want to be with us and you trust us to represent you in this world. Lord, give us a clearer picture of who you are, a humble and accurate assessment about who we are and the faith to follow you with what we have.

You are our only hope in life and death and our only confidence. We know you will never leave us or forsake us so we turn and cling to you alone.

BENEDICTION

Jesus accepts you as you are, but loves you too much to let you stay that way. Rest in His Love.

ⁱ Notice that Peter was seen as the leader of the disciples. He was likely the oldest, he was the only one who was married and when it came time to pay the temple tax Jesus paid it for himself and Peter, suggesting that the other disciples were not yet old enough to be taxed. Even though it was only a few days after his massive failure, Peter still carried influence with the others. If God has given you a position of leadership and influence, be very careful how you use it. Others will follow.

ⁱⁱ There are other options, but these seem to be the top two.