

# Fishing for Forgiveness

John 21:1-19

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady, Pastor

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San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
[www.smccpby.com](http://www.smccpby.com) • [smcc@smccpby.com](mailto:smcc@smccpby.com)

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

During the past three years, I've had the privilege of serving on a committee for the Fund for Theological Education that awards fellowships to those preparing for ministry. These ministry fellowships are awarded to the "most promising" students in seminaries and divinity schools throughout the United States and Canada. Of course, the challenge facing the committee is to determine which applicants are the "most promising." Everyone's opinion is slightly different. Our Gospel story today is a richly textured one about the choice of Peter as the leader of the early Church of Jesus Christ. It's strange that he was chosen as "most promising!"

The college application process at NYU used to include this question to the applicant: "In order for the admissions staff of our college to get to know you better, are there any significant experiences you have had, or accomplishments you have realized, that have helped to define you as a person?"

They received an application with this response: "I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I translate ethnic slurs of Cuban refugees. I write award-winning operas, I manage time efficiently. Occasionally I tread water for three days in a row. . . I cook Thirty-minute Brownies in 20 minutes. I'm an expert in stucco, a veteran in love, and an outlaw in Peru. . . Years ago I discovered the meaning in life but forgot to write it down. I've performed open-heart surgery and I've spoken with Elvis. But I have not yet gone to college." He was admitted – at NYU!

"Are there any significant experiences you've had, or accomplishments you've realized, that have helped to define you as a person?" This story in John's Gospel is an answer to that question for the Apostle Peter and for the early believers. And it is really strange that the qualification for leadership had little to do with a padded resume. In fact, the Church remembered not Peter's qualifications but how his disqualification was not what "defined" him. Instead, this fallen follower of Jesus had a new awakening – a rehabilitation which defined him.

Following the death of Jesus, and with stories about the appearances of the resurrected Lord circulating, Peter and the disciples scattered and return to what they know best: fishing. Called to be fishers of people earlier by their Lord, here near the end of the Gospel we find them on a sea of uncertainty, where they began, to what they knew how to do but now doing it poorly. After a night of coming up empty, they experienced the very truth which Jesus declared a few chapters earlier when he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit because apart from me, you can do nothing."<sup>1</sup> "Nothing" is precisely what these disciples are coming up with!

Disheartened disciples on a fruitless fishing expedition; there are more than a few followers of Jesus today who can also be described like that! There are more than a few congregations which can be described that way too! Aimless activity undertaken in desperation and coming up empty. I know what that feels like, don't you? I was supposed to speak to 250 men at a Lutheran Church several years ago. Despite long hours of agonizing over that speech, I couldn't land an inspired idea in my boat to save my life. The problem was not lack of effort but perfectionism. Sleepless nights of anxious aimlessness; I've known more than a few. One lesson of the early disciples was that branches can't produce their own nourishment. Branches need to be connected to the vine, to the source, to the life-giving provider of nourishment and meaning. That is what the Bible means when it says, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."<sup>2</sup> If your life is coming up empty, maybe you need a renewed connection to the source of life itself! Elsewhere John writes, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."<sup>3</sup>

There is a story told of an Eastern scholar who approached his master to ask, "Master, what can we do to bring God closer to us?"

"What can you do to make the sun rise?" replied the Master. Frustrated and confused, the scholar pressed farther, "Well, then what is the point of all of this instruction that you have given us? Why do we discipline ourselves with prayer and fasting?" The Master replied, "So you will be awake when the sun rises!"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:5

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:4

<sup>3</sup> I John 4:9

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters*, MacMillan Publishing, New York, 1961

Peter awakened in the morning light, after that horrible night in the Garden, to have an experience with the resurrected Lord - an experience of forgiveness that came to redefine him. It was not his denial of Jesus outside the kangaroo court ready to convict Jesus, where three times Peter denied he had anything to do with him. This denial was not the most important piece of history. Peter was not defined by his past misdeeds but by his future deeds because he was forgiven.

Peter thought he had blown it irretrievably. He must have believed he had disqualified himself because of his denial of Jesus. In a panic, he cut and run. What would this Lord think of him now? Could there be a place for him amongst the followers who remained faithful? Many can relate to Peter's experience, feeling that their past has disqualified them; that their lives are forever defined by some dumb, stupid, painful, event that if others ever knew, they would surely recoil in disgust.

Christ wasn't as tangibly present as he had been earlier in Peter's life but he certainly wasn't absent either. And the sun was about to rise. Jesus asks Peter a simple question, "Do you love me?" Now here is strange reversal. Following Peter's denial, you might think the question should be asked the other way around. Peter should be asking Jesus, "Do you still love *me*? Have I disqualified myself and so squandered your goodness to me that you will no longer have anything to do with me?" Even in this story, it is not God's love that is in question. In baptism, it is not God's love that is in question - it's ours. It is our faithfulness which needs renewal all the time. It seems to be more of a question of whether we will remove ourselves from among the faithful; the followers of Christ, because of some misconceived idea that we are disqualified. And so Jesus asks Peter the same question three times, once for every time he was denied. The real question is not whether the love of God in Christ is sufficient but whether we will return that love! Restoration and forgiveness are possible but it becomes most effective for us only when we respond. Let me illustrate what I think that response might look like.

Carrie, a young woman who applied to seminary, wrote about her church experience:

"I am a product of the Bible Belt. In the southeastern communities in which I was raised we Christians were a far cry from the "strangers – or resident aliens" in the world described in the New Testament. The church instead seemed quite at home with its position awash in the mainstream. And although I am grateful for a childhood embedded in the traditions and community of the church, there were some pitfalls

to such a comfortable religion. When being Christian is synonymous with being like everyone else, there isn't much incentive to take the intellectual, social, or spiritual risks which allow faith to grow. The church I knew sometimes resembled Mrs. May's of Flannery O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf," who "was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course believe any of it was true". I think if we had really believed it was true, if we had really taken it seriously, it would have been both harder and better."

Sometimes life becomes harder before it becomes better. Sometimes we have to take some risks to grow. It happened to Peter. He emerged from his encounter with Christ chastened, and humbled but, also renewed and effective. No longer engaged in aimless and empty activity, Peter had a renewed call to service and a reawakened sense of the power of faith. "Do you love me?" Each of us must also answer that question from our Lord. If the answer is, "Yes, Lord. You know all things, you know that I love you," then we will also hear Christ's response, "Then feed my sheep." Meaning, then embrace with renewed commitment the task laid before you to be a conduit of the love of God in Christ for those in need, for those who belong to Christ.

Carrie described her awakening in this way,

"Discouraged by some bitter political struggles, my family left the church during my last year of high school. . . after college I found myself with the option of the Church or nothing. The Church won, and what I found was one of the happiest surprises of my life, although some of my old frustrations with the Church as a "place to belong" still persist. . . I must confess however, that my joy in the life of the Church has less to do with a change in it than with a change in me. These years in the "real world" have been nothing if not humbling, and this increased awareness of my own inadequacies has allowed me to see the flaws of the church with greater understanding and often great humor. And I have realized this side of heaven, flawed people are the only kind available, and that flawed people working together for Christ sure beats flawed people on their own. The Holy Spirit has renewed my mind and heart to receive the mysteries of the sacraments, the beauty of the hymns and liturgy, and the richness of the Word proclaimed, with a depth and power that I am much less able to explain than to simply be thankful for."

Peter might have said something like that! People of faith discover, to their joyous surprise, that they can be humbled by life and still emerge from the experience more alive and vibrant than ever before with a task to undertake, a holy mission to embrace.

Don't let your past determine the present. Let your future direct you. Don't be defined by your worst moments but be defined by your best possibilities. Forgiveness is giving up the hope of a better past. We say it every week in the Assurance of Pardon. "Friends believe the good news of the Gospel – in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!"

Chastened believers are the most effective kind. That is why I think this church is on the threshold of something great! We have a past and not all of it is good but God's grace is enough for us. It is time for us to answer together, like Peter, "You know everything Lord, you know that we love you" and to hear again the command, "Then feed my sheep." With every time of restoration there is also a time of new commissioning! They are inseparable. If we really believe it is true, if we really take it seriously, it is both "harder and better" than anything we have ever known. Amen.

*Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*