

Joshua Sherman

Sunday, April 19, 2020

First Presbyterian Church

## **John 21 - "Reinstated" – Jesus reinstates Peter to mission and leadership**

Hello everyone,

It's an honor to be able to explore the Word of God together with you today, even if it looks and feels very different.

Today we are closing up our current sermon series, where we have tried to walk with Jesus for a few weeks by "walking with Peter" – looking at some of the defining moments of Peter's life and ministry.

One of the things I have really appreciated about this series is that it really connects us to his STORY. This requires us to see how each moment in Scripture – and by analogy, each moment in our lives – fits into the big picture. It helps us to really think about what each passage of Scripture is trying to get us to think, feel, and do.

I'd like to take a moment to think about the ups and downs Peter had been through recently, as we come to the moment described in our reading today. He had believed that Jesus was the Messiah – the God-anointed king from David's line that would throw off the shackles of Rome, establishing an independent Israel as the Kingdom of God – effectively ending Israel's period of exile. His commitment was total. When the mob came to arrest Jesus, Peter was one of two disciples that had a sword – and before you know it, he had made the first strike. But then Jesus rebuked him and healed the man he had injured. They took Jesus away, and Peter denied Jesus three times. Then Peter saw Jesus crucified. Talk about having your entire world crumble in just a few days!

But then, Peter was with the rest of the disciples when Mary Magdalene came and told them a crazy story about Jesus being raised from the dead. As a group, they didn't believe her, but Peter and John raced to the tomb, holding on to some small sliver of hope. That evening, Jesus showed up where the disciples were gathered – walking through their locked doors, proclaiming peace upon them, and breathing the Holy Spirit upon them.

The story in our passage today happens a week or more after Jesus appeared to the disciples in that locked room. So in many ways, for Peter, the hopelessness of the Crucifixion had already been conquered when we encounter him in this passage we've read today. Jesus HAD been raised from the dead, JUST AS HE SAID! Jesus had come back to the Disciples and given them the Holy Spirit.

So what do Peter and some of the other disciples do with this new revelation that Jesus had been raised from the dead? What did they do next when they were given the Holy Spirit?

They went fishing.

***This makes me wonder – how often do we have amazing encounters with God, and then find ourselves back in our usual routines, feeling like not much has really changed?***

It seems clear to me that Peter was still in need of hope – in need of restoration - before he would be ready to fulfill the mission that God had prepared for him. It is in this place in Peter's life that Jesus shows up on the shore. The way that John describes this, it is very clear that he wants to bring us "back to the beginning" of Peter's walk with Jesus. Luke describes this beginning, when Jesus had

first used Peter's boat as a platform to preach from. When Jesus was done preaching, He brings Peter to a pivotal moment when He says, *"Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."*<sup>i</sup>

Peter followed these directions, despite his doubts, and they ended up pulling in so many fish that his boat began to sink.

*When Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." And Jesus responds, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."*<sup>ii</sup>

THIS is the moment that John brings his readers back to with the way that he sets the scene in our passage today. Jesus, just a man on the distant shore, tells them where to cast their nets, and they catch so many fish that they cannot haul them in. John recognizes the repetition of this miracle immediately, and cries out *"It is the Lord!"*<sup>iii</sup>

What happens next makes me think that Jason Emberger and Peter have quite a bit in common. Jason runs 50-mile and 100-mile races at high altitudes. Peter, to my mind was arguably, the first triathlete in the Bible. The first normal human to walk on water. Racing with John to the tomb. And now – when Peter realizes it is Jesus on shore, he can't wait for the boat to get there. He just jumps into the water and begins to swim.

What we see here tells us A LOT about what was going on with Peter. Back when Jesus had first called Peter and performed this miracle, Peter had beckoned his partners in other boats over to help pull in the load of fish so they could be properly prepared for the market. Now – in this moment, Peter is single-minded. He isn't thinking about the fish back in the boat. All he cares about is meeting with the Lord.<sup>iv</sup> I can just see him hoping that Jesus would say again, *"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."*<sup>v</sup>

Peter would not be disappointed. Once the other disciples and their companions get the boat to shore, they are greeted with a meal. What Jesus does after breakfast redefines the rest of Peter's life. He addresses Peter directly, asking Peter 3 different times, *"Do you love me?"* And when Peter says, *"Yes"*, Jesus calls Peter to the mission God has been preparing him for, *"Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."*<sup>vi</sup>

Here, we see Jesus effectively reinstating Peter to ministry and to leadership among the Disciples. I want to focus on two main aspects of this moment today, as we look at Peter's story of faith – and as we examine our own stories.

1. What did Jesus reinstate Peter FROM?
2. What did Jesus reinstate Peter TO?

## FROM

If you have ever heard a sermon preached on this passage before, you have no doubt heard pastors look at this moment through the lens of Peter's denial of Jesus.<sup>vii</sup> There's no mystery to this – the clues are right there in the text. Peter denies Jesus 3 times. Jesus asks Peter *"Do you love me?"* three times. Peter is hurt when Jesus asks a third time, making it clear that the number of repetitions is very meaningful to Peter.

What's more, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' speaks of Peter's impending denial immediately after saying *"You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."*<sup>viii</sup> And here, we see Jesus calling Peter to take care of His sheep. The connections are unmistakable, and they would have been like neon signs to Peter and the other disciples in this moment.

I am convinced that this could not have just been a side conversation between Jesus and Peter. It had to have occurred in the presence of the other disciples. Why? With his denial of the Messiah, Peter had brought shame upon all of them, and especially upon himself. It would have been impossible for Peter to lead unless Jesus first dealt with his shame.<sup>ix</sup>

*So I have to ask myself, and each one of us... Where have I failed God? What failures and sins are you ashamed of? How many of us can identify with, "my family history of...", "my addiction to..." Are we ready to let go of these things, and let God bring healing and wholeness into the dark places of our lives?*

I think we can find hope in Jesus' reinstatement of Peter. Not only had Jesus reinstated him despite his denial. But Jesus had also dealt with his shame! In the presence of the other disciples, there could be no question now about whether Peter's denial disqualified him. The Lord had seen fit to reinstate him, and now the only way was forward!!! What an incredible weight lifted for Peter!

In a small way, the tension and release of this moment in Peter's life reminds me of my daughter Melody. We had hoped to have her drop her training wheels last Summer, but she just wasn't ready. This year, as more and more kids began to ride their bikes around our neighborhood without their training wheels, she came to this rite of passage, and had to face the choice head-on.

- Should I continue to use these training wheels to help me balance, despite the shame of watching my friends zip by me?
- Should I shed the training wheels, take the risk, experience the pain of falling, but also the incredible joy and freedom that riding without them will bring?

A few weeks ago, she stepped up to that choice with courage and joy, and just went for it. And the joy, for her, was palpable, as you can see.

#### [Video of Melody]

So I think in Jesus' reinstatement of Peter, we see the way that Jesus sees us in our moments of weakness, too. With most of us sheltered-in-place right now in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, this may be the closest any of us has ever felt to what Israel must have felt while in exile – longing for restoration so we can gather together with family, friends, and in worship together again.

#### TO

If we want to understand the significance of this story, however, we can't just leave it there. We also need to take a look at what Jesus called Peter TO.

I think we can rightly break this down into two interrelated things:

1. Suffering
2. Mission

#### Suffering

I think, in the Western church, and especially in America today, we can settle for a watered-down version of the Gospel that focuses on what the Gospel means for us, as individuals. This isn't entirely misguided - the question of our own eternal salvation is clearly a matter of the utmost importance! But if that's all we focus on, we miss out on our purpose!

- Jesus didn't just call Peter out of his shame so Peter could "live his best life!" He called Peter to a mission that would cost him his life.
- God didn't make a great nation out of Abraham and call them to be a priestly nation for their own sake – He called them to be a light to the nations.
- God hasn't called us simply for our own sake; He's called us to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God, and He's told us this will involve suffering on our part.

John calls out this cost of discipleship directly in this scene where Jesus reinstates Peter:

*"When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ... Then he said to him, "Follow Me."*<sup>x</sup>

This has echoes for us, too, as Matthew lays out these same ideas universally for believers through the words of Jesus in Mathew 10:

*"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."*<sup>xi</sup>

This must have been a hard word for Peter, and it's a hard word for us.

*So I have to ask myself, and each one of us... What am I attached to that is holding me back from witnessing to people? From getting involved with a ministry that takes care of people's needs, and that engages them with the gospel? Is it fear? Uncertainty? Pride? What is holding you back?*

## Mission

But even our suffering comes with good news. As Paul puts it in Romans 8,

*"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."*<sup>xii</sup>

As believers, we have been adopted as children of God, and God has made this adoption a pivotal part of how He is renewing all things! Even in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, that is good news!!!

So what is the mission God is calling us to? Let's look at this through the eyes of Peter again.

*"Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."*<sup>xiii</sup>

We're not real familiar with shepherding in our society today, but it is a huge theme in the Bible. Moses and David were shepherds. Ancient kings were referred to as shepherds. God is described as the shepherd of His people. The Messiah is foretold as a shepherd to Israel. And Jesus says, in John 10:

*"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."*<sup>xiv</sup>

## Above and Beyond

This last point is one I want to look at for a moment. I don't think it is a coincidence that Peter is the one of the 12 that is the most central in helping the church pivot from preaching the Gospel only to Jews, to preaching – as Paul does – *“first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles.”*<sup>xv</sup>

We see this in Acts 10, when Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, has a vision that he should send for Peter. Peter then has his own vision – the same vision three times, in fact, each of them ending with a voice from heaven telling Peter, *“What God has made clean, do not call unclean.”*<sup>xvi</sup>

When Cornelius' servants find Peter, he then invites them in to be his guests – to eat with him. This would have been unheard of for a Jew of his day, as we see in the way Peter introduces himself later in Cornelius' presence.

*“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”*<sup>xvii</sup>

Upon hearing their reasons, Peter then begins to preach the gospel to them, and while Peter was still preaching to them, the Holy Spirit interrupted him by falling on all those who heard his word, and they began to speak in tongues.

This staggered Peter! Preaching the gospel to Gentiles would have been beyond his wildest expectations for how he would be used as a *“fisher of men!”*<sup>xviii</sup> Beyond even that, this may have been the first time Peter began to catch a glimpse of his impact as a disciple who makes disciples.

The way the presence of the Spirit brought the Gentiles to speaking in tongues harkens back to Pentecost in Acts 2, and I don't think Peter would have missed this. Bringing them to speaking in tongues wasn't just a demonstration of God's power. It was a call to mission. Pentecost signaled God's reversal of what He did at the tower of Babel.

Rather than confusing language, now the Spirit was bridging those gaps. Rather than scatter the nations in response to their pride, and sin, and idolatry, God was preparing Jews that lived in all of the known nations on earth to go back to them and preach the gospel! This signaled the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham – that the seed of Abraham would not only become a great nation, but Abraham's seed would *“bless all the families of the earth.”*<sup>xix</sup> Indeed, this was the beginning of the invitation to all the families of the earth to be adopted into God's family through Jesus – an invitation that we are still to extend to those around us today.

For Peter to see the Gentiles now filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues would have signaled to him that they were also called to go and preach the gospel to all nations! Can you just see the succession of mind-blowing moments this must have been for Peter?

I had a similarly mind-blowing moment the other day, when I realized just how effectively God used the exile to further His plans. When the Spirit fell at Pentecost, there were Jews there from every known nation there, because it was a feast day, and it was common for Jews to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem from far off lands to be there for this feast! Those who had come in pilgrimage were now ready to receive the Spirit, and the gospel, so they could spread both, as they each returned to the nation they had learned to call “home.” This was only possible because they had been scattered to all the known nations of the earth under Assyrian exile. Yes. God used even the exile to prepare the way for this remnant of Israel to fulfill their role to *“be a blessing to all the families of the earth.”*<sup>xx</sup>

*This begs questions for us today, too. What is God calling each of us to? Have we considered that the work that God has called us to – the impact that we can have – is so much bigger, so much greater, so much more meaningful than we can possibly imagine? Have we considered how our current situation of “exile” is opening doors and hearts that would never have opened otherwise? How can we be most effective in working for the Gospel in this time?*

### Closing

Looking back, we can see so much transformation in Peter’s journey. From shame to honor. From guilt to being forgiven. From fearful to bold as a lion. From working for the redemption of Israel, to working for the redemption of the whole world!

*How many of us are longing for this kind of transformation in our selves today?* God has shown us the path forward – as we seek to fulfill the mission He has called us to, we will grow – together – into “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”.<sup>xxi</sup>

And that brings us back to the questions that Pastor Tom asked at the beginning. “Who was your Andrew?”, and “Whose Andrew will you be?” That is, who witnessed to you about Jesus, the way Andrew witnessed to Peter? Who will you tell about Jesus?

And who will they tell? And who will they tell?

We have an unprecedented opportunity to tell the world about Jesus during this challenging time – showing them our faith by the way we treat each other, and the ways we serve those around us.

During this challenging time of isolation and loss, may each of us find ways to stay rooted in Jesus, to grow in His love, and to branch out to serve others – fulfilling our Great Commission to proclaim the coming of our King Jesus - and His Kingdom – to people in all of the nations of the earth; making disciples, baptizing people, and teaching them to respond to Jesus with the obedience that comes from faith.<sup>xxii</sup>

## End Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> Luke 5:4

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 5:8-11

<sup>iii</sup> John 21:7

<sup>iv</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey covers the financial aspect in light of Middle Eastern culture, in “Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes”, pp. 135-146 on “The Call of Peter”

<sup>v</sup> Luke 5:8-11

<sup>vi</sup> Combining Jesus’ commands to Peter in John 21:15-19

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 26:69-75

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 26:30-35

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 10:34-39

<sup>x</sup> John 21:18

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 10:37-38

<sup>xii</sup> Romans 8:18-19

<sup>xiii</sup> Combining Jesus’ commands to Peter in John 21:15-19

<sup>xiv</sup> John 10:14-16

<sup>xv</sup> Romans 1:16

<sup>xvi</sup> Acts 10:15

<sup>xvii</sup> Acts 10:28-29

<sup>xviii</sup> Luke 5:10

<sup>xix</sup> Genesis 12:1-3

<sup>xx</sup> Genesis 12:1-3

<sup>xxi</sup> Ephesians 4:13

<sup>xxii</sup> Paul’s formulation of the goal of the gospel in Romans 1