

**“Restored for a Reason”**

*The third time He said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:17).*

The American poet John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote, “Of all the words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these...it might have been.” What do you regret? What are the things from your past that always seem to resurface even as you try to leave them behind and focus on the future? The truth is that every one of us can pinpoint things from our past that haunt us; things that we did or things that we failed to do that have turned into regrets that we just can’t seem to shake. We are all burdened by things in our lives that we wish we had done differently and, even for Christians who take comfort in God’s promise of forgiveness, our regrets can be difficult to bear.

Peter’s regrets must have been profound. On the night before Jesus was crucified, as they gathered to celebrate the Passover, Jesus spoke in plain language, and just hours before He would be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told his disciples, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me” (Matthew 26:31). And to this troubling prediction, Peter responded with boldness, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will...Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Matthew 26:33, 35).

In the safety of the upper room and in the security of Jesus’ presence, Peter made courageous commitments to stand by Jesus and defend Him to the end. But as the evening wore on, things changed. And when their private prayer time was interrupted by a mob with “swords and clubs” Peter’s bravado quickly vanished.

Listen to Mark’s account of Peter’s denial: “While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. ‘You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,’ she said. But he denied it. ‘I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,’ he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, ‘This fellow is one of them.’ Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, ‘Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.’ He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man you’re talking about.’ Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.’ And he broke down and wept” (Mark 14:66-72).

After Peter had made a public proclamation of loyalty, and in Jesus’ greatest hour of need, Peter simply walked away. He turned his back on Jesus and saved his own skin. And that kind of betrayal is not something that is easily forgotten. Even though Jesus had risen from the dead; even though Jesus had appeared to the disciples behind closed doors and given them the authority to forgive in His name; Peter’s denial was still out there...it had not been dealt with...and his guilt must have been crushing.

It is here, in this cauldron of guilt and regret that the Risen Christ appears to Peter and the disciples for the third and final time in John’s Gospel, and the reason He comes to them on the Galilean beach is to restore them. As this reading begins, John describes a scene that bears a striking resemblance to the call of the first disciples from Luke 5 in which, after a long night of fruitless fishing, Jesus tells the disciples to, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4). And as Luke records, “When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break” (Luke 5:6). This detail is important to see because today’s Gospel reading is no chance coincidence. When Jesus stands on the beach and directs their catch, He is taking them back to the beginning. He is restoring them, not to their profession as fisherman, but to a right, fresh and reconciled relationship with their risen Lord, a fact He

confirms as He serves them breakfast on the beach. Think about it. The last meal they had shared together was in the upper room before His arrest and prior to the disciples' abandonment. Now, here on the beach, the Risen Christ serves them once again as His restored and reconciled brothers.

But the most moving and complete example of restoration happens as Jesus speaks to Simon Peter. After they had finished eating Jesus turns to Peter and says, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" Now there are several ways to understand this question. Some commentators have said that here Jesus means, "Do you love me more than you love these men?" Others have suggested that Jesus wanted to know if Peter loved Him more than the earthly blessings that his vocation as a fisherman had provided. I don't buy either of these interpretations. To me, Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you love me more than these men love me?" And the meaning of Jesus' question takes Peter right back to the upper room; right back to his statement of allegiance, "Even if all fall away, I never will." And whether it was motivated by guilt or regret, Peter's answer in verse 15 almost seems like one of shamed shock: "Yes Lord" he says, "you know that I love you."

Peter's words seemed clear, and yet after a simple three word response, Jesus immediately presses Peter with essentially the same question, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" Confused, Peter answered again, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Then a third and final time Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Now, feeling the weight of his guilt and the shame of his sin, the broken disciple confesses his faith and throws himself on the mercy of His all-knowing God and Lord and friend and says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

And there it is. Just as Peter had denied Christ three times in courtyard of the high priest, Jesus had given him three chances to confess. Jesus didn't need to hear Peter's confession...but Peter did, and by repeating His question three times, Peter was restored, not in any generic or general way, but in a way that spoke to the specific and personal shame, guilt and regret that had plagued Peter since his denial of Christ.

Jesus came to Peter and gave Peter exactly what he needed...and that is how God deals with us as well. In the most personal ways, Jesus comes to us where we are and He absolves and restores in the most individual and intimate ways possible. Jesus doesn't wait for us to come to Him. He is there in His Word, and in the fellowship of believers – of which we are a part – to move us from denial to confession, from darkness to light, from shame to joy, from guilt to innocence and from sin to service.

That is why Jesus responds to Peter as He does: "Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep." God doesn't restore us just to put us on the shelf. Through His blood, He has restored us for a reason and that reason is to proclaim the message of God's love and gracious restoration in Jesus Christ.

What do you regret? Are there things from your past that always seem to resurface, even as you try to leave them behind? The truth of today's text is that Jesus doesn't love us because we lived our lives without regret. And just as He knew that Peter would deny Him, our Lord knows what we have done, He knows about our guilt, He knows about our regrets and for those sins He went to the Cross. Jesus Christ is all about restoration and no matter what you have done, today He comes to you with complete and personal forgiveness for all of your sins and He calls you to feed and serve and love and care in the name of our redeeming and restoring Savior. And in Christ Jesus, He gives you the power to do it. Go in the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold