

This morning, I am in the twenty-ninth week of a sermon series that I've entitled "Meeting Jesus." I am making my way through Luke's account of the life of Jesus, looking at various interactions that people had with Jesus, in order to better understand what it means to know and follow Him. This morning, we are going to be in Luke 22:19-22 and 31-62, looking at Jesus, Simon Peter, and Judas.

Luke 22:19-22, 31-34, 39-62 - And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."²¹ But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.²² The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But **woe to that man who betrays him!**"...³¹ "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat."³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."³³ But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."³⁴ Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times **that you know me.**"...³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him.⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation."⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling **to the ground.**⁴⁵ When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.⁴⁶ "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."⁴⁷ While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him,⁴⁸ but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the **Son of Man with a kiss?**"⁴⁹ When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?"⁵⁰ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.⁵¹ But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with **swords and clubs?**"⁵³ Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."⁵⁴ Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance.⁵⁵ And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.⁵⁶ A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

⁵⁷ But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said. ⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” “Man, I am not!” Peter replied. ⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰ Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Let me sum up this story, and how it relates to our story, in three acts:

1) Failure

As Jesus shares this Last Supper with his disciples, his final meal with his followers before his crucifixion, there are two disciples in particular whose stories will feature prominently in the subsequent events: Simon Peter, and Judas. At some point a few years back, Jesus called both men to follow Him, which would have been a true honor in those days. But although their attitudes towards Jesus have become polar opposites by this point, they are both going to end up in a dark place very soon. Peter, whose given name was Simon but was given the nickname Peter, Petros, “the rock” by Jesus, is loyal to Jesus, and one of his closest friends. He is also very passionate and impulsive: he is the one who climbs out of the boat to walk on the water after Jesus. He is the one who proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And in the account we read today, He is the one who will cut the ear off of the guard in his attempt to defend Jesus. When Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper about his impending death, we read this:

Luke 22:31-34 - “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” ³³ But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”

Simon Peter loves Jesus and is sure that he will follow him into suffering, even if it means imprisonment or death. But soon after, in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus is praying, Peter will fall asleep instead of staying up with Jesus. And then, when Jesus is arrested, we see this happen:

Luke 22:55-62 - And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. ⁵⁶ A servant girl

saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.” ⁵⁷ But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said. ⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.” “Man, I am not!” Peter replied. ⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, **for he is a Galilean.**” ⁶⁰ Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Despite Simon Peter’s genuine love for Jesus and loyalty to Him, and despite his sincere desire to follow him even if it meant suffering and dying, in the end his fear, his self-protectiveness, or whatever it was, got the better of him, and he denied three times that he knew Jesus.

Judas, on the other hand, had grown increasingly bitter and resentful of Jesus during his time following him. We are told that Judas was the treasurer, but apparently his proximity to money caused him to become greedy and a thief:

John 12:4–6 - But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

And shortly before the Last Supper, after another display of generosity towards Jesus, Judas had enough and decided to hand him over to the authorities:

Matthew 26:6–16 - While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, ⁷ a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. ⁸ When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. ⁹ “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.” ¹⁰ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a **beautiful thing to me.**” ¹¹ The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” ¹⁴ Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I **deliver him over to you?**” So they counted

out for him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Simon Peter denies knowing Jesus, and Judas agrees to betray him for 30 pieces of silver. And so, as Jesus celebrates the Last Supper with his disciples, he says:

Luke 22:21-22 – “But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. ²² The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!”

Jesus knows what is about to happen. He knows he is going to die, and he knows who is going to betray him. And yet he allows it to happen, because he knows that it is all part of a greater plan.

And so, central to the events of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion are these two disciples. One, Simon Peter, who loves Jesus, sincerely wants to follow Him, and is loyal to Him, and Judas, who has become increasingly bitter and resentful towards Jesus, and wants to see Him gone. But despite their contrasting allegiances to Jesus, when the pressure comes, they both fall; Simon Peter denies knowing Jesus, and Judas betrays him.

Simon Peter and Judas are not alone in their failures. What comes to your mind when I start to talk about failures? Perhaps you can see yourself in Simon Peter or in Judas. For some of us, we genuinely love Jesus and sincerely desire to follow Him, or to be good to others, and yet, when the stress comes, when the pressure is on, we give in to our self-centeredness, to our sinful nature, bowing to our fear, choosing to protect ourselves, and turning our backs on our Lord. We are like Paul, who wrote:

Romans 7:15,18–19,22-25 - I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing... For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

And sometimes, like Judas, we allow ourselves to become bitter and resentful, and we end up intentionally saying terrible things, or acting in awful ways towards God or towards others.

This used to be my biography on our website:

Eric has been the pastor of NewLife since August 2006. He is a poor planner, hates confrontation, has a lazy prayer life, enjoys doing nothing, is chronically self-centered, forgets often, coasts on talent, avoids difficult people, doesn't take initiative, and rarely thinks in advance. He has a hard time finishing things, remembering things, or staying on task. He is also a fan of the Chicago Cubs.

But in spite of all of this, God called him to be the pastor of NewLife, and continues to use Him in order to demonstrate that Jesus alone deserves the glory.

Clearly I wrote that before the Cubs won the world series in 2016. Why did I write this? Paul said to boast in our weakness, and I wanted to point people to Jesus, not to myself. But I also clearly remember in tears with Nancy Allbee as I felt the pain of these sins, these character defects, and how they were hurting the people I loved and led. It wasn't just a cute biography; it was an honest confession of my sin and the majesty of my Lord and Savior, who alone deserved all the glory. I have hurt many people because of my sins, and we have made it through some really dark and challenging times. And it is only because of the grace of God and the grace of His people.

And so, we find ourselves in a position like Simon Peter, living with great intentions and sincere efforts, but falling tragically short and bringing genuine harm on others. And sometimes we find ourselves like Judas, overcome by bitterness and resentment, intentionally stabbing someone in the back or seeking to take them out. Live long enough and you will fail greatly, and you will hurt others.

So how are we to respond to our failures?

2) Response

After Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified, we see how Simon Peter and Judas respond to their actions. Simon Peter, as we already read, wept bitterly when he realized that he had denied knowing Jesus. And then we find out in John's gospel that he has gone back fishing, returning to the life he had before Jesus called him to follow him. It's almost as if he has been devastated by his failure and decided,

well, at least I know how to fish. He is a broken man, humbled and heartbroken by his failure.

Judas, despite his brazen betrayal, is also eventually seized with conviction by what he has done.

Matthew 27:3–5 - When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴“I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.” ⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Both Simon Peter and Judas are overcome by guilt, distraught at what they have done. But at least Simon Peter does not take matters to the extreme end that Judas does. Simon Peter goes fishing. Judas takes his own life.

How have you responded to failure in your life? Do you minimize it, explain it away, rationalize your behavior, blame others? Or does it hang around your neck, weighing you down? Have you found a way to get past it? Or does it feel like your life has been knocked off track? How can we get by our failures and not end up in despair like Simon Peter, or worse, completely out of the game like Judas?

3) Grace

After Jesus rises from the dead, Simon Peter is excited by the news that Jesus may be alive. And in John’s gospel, we see this beautiful exchange between Simon Peter and the risen Jesus:

John 21:1–19 - Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵ He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. ⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. ⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his

outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and **jumped into the water.**⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.¹² Jesus said to them, **“Come and have breakfast.”** None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, **“Feed my lambs.”**¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, **“Feed my sheep.”**¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but 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.”¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Although Simon Peter has denied Jesus, Jesus seeks him out to meet him in his despair, restore him, and once again call him to follow him. We see Jesus showing Peter great grace, not bringing up his failure, but asking him three times “do you love me,” revealing to Peter that He knows his heart, and he knows that despite his failures, there is genuine love there. **Judas, as we have sadly seen, did not believe that there was grace available to cover over his sins.** He did not believe that his guilt could be forgiven, and so he took his own life. But Peter receives the grace of Jesus that covers over his sins and provides him with a fresh start, and Peter will eventually become one of the key leaders in the early church, changing the course of world history and living a life that will honor God.

Remember once again Paul’s words as he reflected in agony upon his continual failure to live up to the way he desired to live:

Romans 7:24-25 - What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul knew that, despite his failures, despite his continual inability to live up to the man that he wanted to be, the man that God had called him to be, there was grace to cover over his sins, because of Jesus. After all, Jesus had just died, not just as some terrible tragedy, but in order to take the penalty that Peter and Judas and you and me deserve for our sin, for our failures, for our rebellion against God, for the times that we have fallen short, given in to fear, or intentionally wounded others. But the promise is that all who turn to Jesus in repentance will be forgiven:

1 John 1:8–9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And that God's grace is sufficient for our weakness:

2 Corinthians 12:9–10 - But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Two men, Judas and Simon Peter, both guilty of a terrible failure, but only one is able to believe that there is grace available to cover over his sin. One takes his own life, and one is able to put the past behind and start fresh with the power of God's grace. Remember the words of Jesus in **Luke 22:31-32** – "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Please understand that there is a battle that rages over your soul. You don't need to understand farming to understand what is going on. Simon Peter will deny Jesus, and **Satan** wants to take that opportunity to disqualify Peter from service, to take him out of the game, just like he did to Judas. But Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed for him that his faith may not fail. The same battle is going on over you. There is an enemy who wants to sift you like wheat. He wants to convince you that you are no good, and that God could never forgive you. Brothers and sisters, in Jesus' name, don't listen to him! That is not the God of mercy talking. That is not the God who died for you talking. This passage shows us that when we fail God, he never disqualifies us. Yes, he takes our sin so seriously that He died to pay for them, but when we are broken before him, he forgives us and calls us again to his follow Him and serve others.

You must believe that the Bible is not a book of morals, stories of moral examples who we should emulate. The Bible is a record of God working in the lives of people who don't deserve it, resist it, and still don't get it after they're saved. He uses screw-ups, people who get it wrong and can not live up to the calling on their lives, who sin and sin again and even when they promise to do it differently this time, sin yet again. God delights in taking failures, people like Peter who have let him down, and using them to build his kingdom. Why? Because people like Peter are humble. They realize that they are no better than anyone else. They know that in their own power they will fail, and they know that they need God. That's why God loves to use people who screw up. So when you fail, don't disqualify yourself. He can take all your sin and failure and use it to make you into a humble servant who relies on His power, on His Holy Spirit, to do in and through you what you could not do in your own power. When you fail, remember that God knows your heart – he knows you love him, and he has already forgiven you through the death of his son. Fall on his mercy, and let him restore you to his service.

When I was in college, I always found myself feeling depressed and discouraged at the end of every school year. Every year, I came into the fall with high hopes of sharing the love of Jesus with the people on my floor, and every spring I looked back at failure after failure, missed opportunity after missed opportunity. I felt like I hadn't made any difference at all. At the end of my senior year, this feeling of discouragement was worse. Here I was, leaving UConn, and what difference had I made? How many lives of my unbelieving friends had been changed by my witness? I truly felt like I had failed God.

After exams were over, most of the campus was empty, except for the seniors. One day, as I was walking across campus, I was stopped by a young woman who explained that she was with the Daily Campus, and wanted to ask me a question for Husky Talk. Now, the Daily Campus is the school newspaper, and Husky Talk is the first thing every student reads when they open up the newspaper. Husky Talk consists of one question, such as "What are you doing for spring break?" or "what's the most embarrassing thing you've ever done?", and three students give their short one sentence answers. The answers are usually weak attempts at humor and tend to be full of sexual innuendo, but every day we'd open up to the paper to see if someone we knew was in Husky Talk. In my four years I had never been interviewed for Husky Talk... until now.

I told the woman that I would be glad to answer her question, and she explained that this was for the graduation edition of the Daily Campus, which would be given to every graduating senior and every family and friend that came to graduation later that week. The question she asked me was, “Now that you are graduating, what do you hope to do with your life?” I stepped back and thought. Whatever I said was going to be read by thousands of people in a few days. What did I want to say? I thought of something funny to say, and then I thought of the truth. I knew that all I really wanted to do with my life was to serve God, to love him and to love those around me. But could I say that? Could I really put myself out there like that? I thought it over, tried to find a way out of it or something funny that would still be sort of true, but I knew what I had to say. “OK, I’ve got it,” I said. “I want to love God with all I am and love those around me.” “That’s it?” she said. “That’s it,” I said. “All right... thanks,” she said, wrote it down, and turned to leave. I walked back to my dorm, feeling very exposed, but also a nervous excitement. I felt like God was redeeming my mistakes and was giving me the opportunity to tell the whole campus that I loved him.

Well, the day of graduation came, and I went to the site where graduation would take place. The paper hadn’t come out yet, and I was so nervous that I could hardly sit still. Finally, as we were sitting in our seats, I saw some people looking through the newspaper, and I asked someone if I could borrow their paper. I opened to the middle, and looked at the Husky Talk. There was the question – “Now that you are graduating, what are you hoping to do?” Six people had been interviewed and given answers – some serious, about becoming a lawyer or working with animals, and some attempts at humor, like one guy who wanted to follow Van Halen around. But as I looked over the replies, I didn’t see mine. She had left mine out. Part of me felt relief, that I hadn’t been exposed. But part of me was truly disappointed. And as I sat there thinking about it, I thought of Jesus sitting with Peter after his resurrection. Peter had felt like a failure, just like I had, and Jesus had asked him, do you love me? And Peter had replied from his heart, “Lord, you know I love you.” And I realized what had happened. That interview wasn’t for other people to hear. It was for me to hear. In the midst of my failure, the Lord had asked me, “Eric, do you love me?” And in doing that he had revealed my heart. I did love him. I do love him. And I will always love him.

Because of Jesus, your guilt and shame are covered. You are restored and forgiven. You have eternal life. Your life has eternal significance. And you have his life-transforming power within you to overcome the devil and this world. If you do not know Jesus but would like to, you can pray something like this from your heart to His:

Jesus, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I believe in you as my Savior and Lord. Amen.