



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“A Fish Story”

John 21:1-19

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They're in every high school yearbook. Senior Superlatives. Best dressed. Biggest flirt. Most likely to become famous. Most likely to be in the Olympics. Most likely to streak at graduation. Biggest closet nerd. Most likely to be President.

In Galilee, at the Vocational Tech High School, Peter's Senior Superlative would have been Most Likely to be Loyal to the Very End. He was loyal, and a born leader. Peter, “petros,” means “the Rock.” No one could have guessed that he would crumble into Peter the Pebble. But that's how he shows up in the last chapter of John's gospel.

Peter has blown it, big time. He is denier in chief, head deserter. He must have felt low, small, trying to navigate life with his moral compass broken. He turned his back on Jesus. He turned his back on a friend. The Rock has become a Pebble.

I'm guessing we all know how that feels. Empty, aching. We obsess over why we did what we did, we wish we could take our words back, we long for another chance, even while we know there is no second chance; still, we hope against hope we might get a do over.

Psychologists who research shame tell us that unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being something wrong.¹ Which makes shame so hard to deal with, because to talk about it means we have to experience it again. Who wants to talk about cheating on a spouse? Who's fond of discussing an angry outburst at a parent, a child, or a colleague? Who wants to open up about and have to re-live, the experience of letting down a trusted friend? I'm not sure I want to go there. You probably don't, either. And Peter, he definitely doesn't want to.

Peter denies Jesus. Not only once, but three times. There's no way to get around that. Peter denies Jesus and Jesus dies – a terrible death. Easter Sunday is in the rear view mirror by the time we catch up to Peter in our story. Disciples have already seen Jesus twice since God raised him from the dead. Jesus has given them the Holy Spirit and sent them into the world. (John 20:21-22). But the only place Peter goes is back to his boat. He doesn't want to talk about what's happened. The burden of what he's done weighs down the Rock. Peter carries regret and shame like millstones around his neck.

Over Easter weekend Netflix released Brené Brown's onstage talk entitled *Call to Courage*. She brings energy and humor to uncomfortable things, like vulnerability and fear and shame. As a scholar and author, Brené Brown has spent 20 years researching shame. Here's how she defines it:

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201703/whats-the-difference-between-guilt-and-shame>

Shame is the feeling you would get if you walked out of a room that was filled with people who know you and they start saying such hurtful things about you that you don't know that you could ever walk back in and face them again in your life.²

Brené Brown admits she's been known to cope with what she calls a 'shame storm' by eating peanut butter and binge watching *Downton Abbey*. What do you do when you feel shame? In such moments, when everything falls apart inside, we look for a place to hide. The paradox of shame is that when we most need to rebuild a relationship that our shameful selves has damaged, we run and hide. Who, in a moment of shame, hasn't felt or said, "I just want to disappear?"

Peter heads back to his old day job, away from prying eyes and critical comments. He goes back to doing what he knows best. He and the others go fishing. Because shame is contagious. Peter's fishing buddies seem caught up in what experts call "second-hand shame."

Their catch reflects what they feel like: nothing. They catch not one fish.

Then, just after daybreak, there's Jesus. He stands on the beach, but they don't know its Jesus. "You have no fish, have you? ... Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." Suddenly, the net is so full of fish, disciples strain to haul it in. In the presence of such extraordinary abundance they recognize the Lord. 153 fish is a crazy big number. That's how much God loves us.

They all end up on the beach, where Jesus hosts a meal, of fish and bread. It sounds a lot like communion. When Jesus finishes grilling fish for breakfast, it's time for him to grill Peter. He knows Peter so well. It's as if he says:

*I knew I'd find you here, back to your old habits, empty hopes and empty nets. You're worried you've let me down, that you've been disqualified - but you're the one I've chosen. Do you really think I didn't know your weakness when I called you? I know you better than you know yourself.*³

This is their first personal encounter since those final miserable days just before the end. Back then, during that night, in all four gospels, Peter denies he knows Jesus. But here in John's gospel, the content of Peter's denial is a bit different. Here, Peter doesn't deny he knows Jesus as much as he denies his own identity as a disciple. Let's revisit the encounter in the courtyard of the high priest from John, chapter 18:

The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." [And then a while later]... They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves... [Later,] One of the slaves of the high priest ... asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed. (John 18:15-27, condensed)

And we imagine "tears, running down Peter's face, like rain down a rock."⁴

Standing by the fire on that cold night, Peter denies he is a disciple, three times. In today's gospel reading, Jesus and Peter talk again, around another charcoal fire on the beach. Three times, Jesus takes the initiative to

² <https://www.netflix.com/title/81010166>

³ Adapted from: <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/4/30/love-in-action-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-3>

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, p. 136.

ask Peter if he loves him. Three times, Peter says he does. Scripture says Peter feels the hurt. Jesus companions him into the pain. He cuts through Peter's shame and restores relationship with the world's worst disciple, the denier and deserter.

Jesus gives Peter what he most needs – a do over – a second chance to be a disciple. He invites the Rock to be the foundation of the church. It's a huge task that will consume Peter's days going forward. He'll participate in abundance and make abundance happen for others; he'll be the presence of Jesus when Jesus is gone. This life trajectory will bring him joy and it also will lead to his early death. "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep; feed my sheep."

Jesus does not see "Peter the Pebble," or "Simon the Shamed." To him, Peter was, and is, and always will be "The Rock" – the foundation of all we know today as "church."

The risen Lord stands on the shores of our lives and at the doors to our futures. When we answer the knock, the One who endured the shame of a Roman crucifixion asks us: "Do you love me?" "Will you follow me?" It's as if Jesus is saying:

Stop thinking in terms of scarcity, of limitations, of what you can't do! I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly - so think in terms of bounty, of opportunities, of what you CAN do (John 10:10). Look at all these fish, filling the net to overflowing! I am stronger than your shame.⁵

God's love is stronger than our shame. In spite of our shame, we can make choices to be brave. Back to Brené Brown and *Call to Courage*. She describes a man who sits with his wife, who has Stage IV breast cancer, as together they make plans for their toddlers. That's bravery. Or a woman who goes on a first date after a divorce. That's bravery. Or a young adult who plans how to come out to parents and family. That's making a choice to be brave.

God surprises us all the time with newness. Even when we hurt. Especially when we hurt. Facing the consequences of his actions hurts Peter. Really knowing himself hurts. Jesus sees his shame and also so much more. God knows our shortcomings and failures, and sees us as so much more. God calls us children of God, siblings of Jesus; from Biggest Flirt and Best Dressed to Denier in Chief, and Most Ashamed. God knows our fears and the shame that binds us.

God looks us in the eye and says – three times – Feed my sheep. Which means take care of each other, and everything needed to keep each other alive. Feed my sheep is permission to forget about our screw-ups. To stop letting yesterday use up too much of today. Feed my sheep is permission to put our shame and regrets in the past. God knows, Jesus has. Amen.

⁵ Adapted from: <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/4/30/love-in-action-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-3>