

THE RECOVERY OF PERSONS

John 21:1-14

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*The chimes of time ring out the news,
Another day is through,
Someone slipped and fell,
Was that someone you?*

It has been said that life is a little like an ice cream cone – the moment you think you have got it licked, it drips on you. That was certainly true for Simon Peter. He denies Jesus three times to save face in front of a chambermaid. But the Christ who predicted His betrayal at the last supper comes to forgive him at the first breakfast. At this cookout for a dropout, all of us can find grace and strength for our times of need. I want us to live with this resurrection story told in John 21 today. There are three things that I call to your attention.

When it comes to failure, we have a Friend. What is it about the human personality that drives us into isolation when we miss the mark of our high calling? When Adam ate the apple he went into hiding. When God called Jonah, he runs right into the belly of a whale. The prodigal is isolated in the far country. Peter deals with his denial by going fishing. Now sometimes you fish for fish and sometimes you fish for flight. It seems very clear in this story that Peter has got leaving on his mind.

For a long time, I thought that everybody who dropped out of church was either mad at me or somebody like me. Occasionally people do get their feelings hurt and once in a while a pastor really blows it. But I have discovered over

the years that a greater reason for church dropouts is that we who are disciples blow it. Like Peter we start out the Christian walk with high hopes and great dreams. But our reach exceeds our grasp and practice proves to be much more difficult than profession. God has a way of wanting so very much of us, *ALL* of us, until it eventually gets to be too much. Then we slip away to the old shores where we have been before.

As a lady once told me years ago, "I couldn't keep coming to church on Sunday listening to you preach, Howard, and keep sleeping with my boss on Thursday night. And since I didn't want to break off the affair, it was just simpler to quit coming to church. So I quit." I need to say to you today that God does not easily give up on His own whatever our reasons for going back to the old ways.

Francis Thompson lived in Great Britain about 100 years ago. He was the son of a physician. Francis enrolled in Owens College to study medicine. He hated it. Instead of facing his father and dealing with his disappointment, Francis went into the underworld of London where he sold matches and hailed cabs and finally became deeply addicted to opium. Francis Thompson also discovered in those days of his life that God is like a hound of Heaven, and he gave us that wonderful poem about God's persistence in finding His own. Do you remember it?

*I fled him down the nights and down the days.
I fled him down the arches of the years
I fled him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter
Up visited hopes I sped:
And shot, precipitated,
Down titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.*

*But with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat
And a voice beat more instant than the feet
All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.*

Standing somewhere on the beachfront of your broken life today, you'll find Jesus. "It is the Lord," said the disciples. The invitation is for you, "Come to breakfast." When you fail, you've got a Friend.

When it comes to failure, we have a Savior. The millennium edition of Microsoft windows has a new feature that is called "Systems Restore." If your computer crashes with vital information, all you have to do is enter the date of your vital entry and it will be immediately restored. So the critical financial data that you entered on Wednesday before your computer crashed on Thursday, can be recovered. Your daughter's work on her history project that she did on Monday, now can still be used in the long run. Isn't that a wonderful invention?

Several years ago my brother-in-law restored a 1933 Auburn automobile. It sat unused for 40 years. It was rusty, dirty, and wouldn't run. But with great patience and tender care, he took it apart piece by piece and put it back together again. These days he goes around from town to town showing off his restored car in parades of antique vehicles.

Some of you know how to take old beat up furniture, nothing more than another's person's junk, and restore it into a fine antique. Now I ask you, if we can do that with information, with automobiles, and with furniture, why can't we do that with people? You see I love that word, restore. It's one of life's finest words. To restore is to reconstruct, to rejuvenate, to repair, or to refresh. It's also to renew, revitalize, reinstall, and to reinstate. I think we ought to be

in the restoration business. After all, that's what the gospel is all about, it seems to me.

Ray Waddle said yesterday in *The Tennessean*, "We live in a time when forgiveness is hard. America is not specializing in forgiveness at the moment." Of course, he is right. We sort of decided to get tough in the world you know. Three strikes and you're out! I want to promote four balls and you're on! What's wrong with restoring people? I understand grace can be cheap and cheap grace is costly. But I submit to you today, that no grace is deadly! Where would any of us be without the unmerited, unearned, undeserved, unending mercy of God that is extended to all of us?

As the coals on the morning fire simmer, Jesus engages Peter in the restoration process. Isn't it interesting what He doesn't say? He doesn't say, "I told you so." He doesn't say to Peter, "You never, ever do anything right." He doesn't ask Peter, "What's wrong with you anyway?" He doesn't ask Peter, "Do you have any idea how much you have hurt Me?" He doesn't ask Peter, "Will you promise never, ever, ever, ever to do this again?" No, He's just got one question, "Peter, do you love Me more than these?" "Yes Lord, You know that I love You." "Peter, do you love Me?" "Yes Lord, You know I love You." "Peter, do you love Me?" And Peter, suddenly sensing that this is more than a casual conversation after breakfast, says, "Oh, Lord, You know all things and You know that I love You!" Love has the power to turn people around. If Jesus had Peter's love He could reform and refashion him into another man. That's restoration!

You see, God uses broken things -- broken soil to produce a crop; broken clouds to give us rain; broken people as wounded healers for a hurting world. I can't prove it, but I like to think that Peter put a bumper sticker on the back of

his boat that went something like this: ***Not perfect, just forgiven.***

I ran into this saying the other day, “If at first you don’t succeed, then skydiving is not for you.” That’s absolutely right. But salvation is designed for those of us who have come to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. Forgiveness fits faulty people. I, for one, am eternally grateful for a caring Christ who will not let us go, but dares to come to find us in our brokenness and asks us a simple question, “Could we start again please, could we start again?” When it comes to failure, you have a Savior.

When it comes to failure, we have a future. We are only earthen vessels, but God has a place for cracked pots. Even feet of clay can show the way when they move in the footprints of the Savior. What does Jesus say to Peter? “Feed My sheep.” “Feed My lambs.” “Feed My sheep, follow Me.” You see, Peter needed Jesus but there’s something else in that story. Jesus needed Peter. Have you thought about that? Jesus needed this guy whose nickname is Rocky to build a church.

I don’t know why God chooses to do it this way. It’s a mystery to me. The longer I do it, the more mysterious it becomes. Why is it that God chooses to enter a partnership with the likes of you and me? Why doesn’t God just do it? I don’t know. But I know that it is a powerful privilege to participate in His plan. I know that it is a high honor to play on His team. I know it is a humbling experience to serve in His name.

When Thomas Edison invented his first light bulb, after thousands of tries, he handed the finished product to a young assistant who nervously carried it upstairs, step by step. At the last moment, in the nervousness of the

occasion, the boy tripped, dropped it, and it broke. The whole team had to work another 24 hours to put this light bulb together again. When they had accomplished their task, the great inventor handed the finished product to the same assistant who, this time, carried it to safety.

Peter Drucker says no organization can depend on genius. The supply is always scarce and unreliable. It is the test of any organization to make ordinary human beings perform better than they seem capable of; to bring out whatever strength there is in its members, and to use each person's strength to help others perform. The purpose of an organization is to enable common people to do uncommon things. What if your boss was a Jewish carpenter? Whether building Habitat houses, teaching Sunday school, tutoring children, or affecting in various ways the political and social climates of a community, *YOU* have the power to change society. So maybe it behooves us to get up from our poorly made beds and just do it in Jesus' name.

*It is no secret what God can do
What He's done for others, He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you
It is no secret, what God can do.*