

The Renovation of Simon Peter

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 21:15-19

All the other disciples are present in this resurrection account, but in the end, this is a story about Jesus and Peter. And if you want to understand the grace and truth of these words you have to understand the relationship between Peter and Jesus as John has presented it to us in his gospel. You have to understand the history between these two men.

To help us see all that clearly, let us go to that moment at the beginning of the story when Peter is out on the Sea of Galilee fishing. Let's imagine what it was like for Peter. Let us imagine what might have been going on in his head.

It is three in the morning, and it is pitch dark. There is no light at all. Peter is hauling up the wet nets onto the deck for the third time that night, and even though only half the net has been pulled from the water his experienced hands can already tell from the weight that they are empty again. And Peter can feel the frustration rising in his chest. He was not a patient man and the disappointments of this night combined with the disappointments of the previous weeks have him muttering to himself: "Empty again," he growls, "Empty like my life. First, I failed as a disciple, and now it's like I can't even fish anymore." Empty nets. Empty life. Peter is not exactly on top of the world.

Peter had not always been down on himself. In fact, it used to be just the opposite. Peter was the can-do disciple. Peter was the group optimist. If Jesus asked a question, he was the first to raise his hand. If Jesus needed a volunteer, Peter was the first to step forward. When following Jesus was becoming more controversial, and Jesus asked his disciples if they wanted to walk away, the other 11 all looked at their feet it was Peter who said, "Lord to whom can we go. You have the words of eternal life." On the night he was betrayed, when Jesus talked about going away, the other disciples were speechless, but not Peter: "Lord I will lay down my life for you," he said, and he meant it, or at least he felt like he did. At the last supper, when Jesus pulls out the washbasin and starts washing feet, it is Peter who first tries to out-humble the other disciples by refusing to be washed and then tries to be the most righteous by asking that Jesus wash all of him. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, Peter is the one who pulls out a sword to defend his master. He manages to cut off someone's ear, which Jesus promptly heals.

That's Peter. That's the portrait of Peter in the gospel of John and that portrait is consistent with his portrait in other gospels. Peter is full of passion, full of ideals, full of energy. For him discipleship was a swashbuckling romance. He wasn't content with ordinary service and ordinary acts of faithfulness and average achievement. He was going to do something great for God. He was going to get a gold star from Jesus. He was going to hit a home run for Jesus.

And then when his moment really came, when he finally got up to bat, he didn't hit a home run. He struck out. He struck out looking. He never even took a cut. He never even got the bat off his shoulder. "Didn't I see you with the Galilean? Aren't you one of his disciples?" "I am not! I was never there! I tell you, I never knew the man." The cock crowed and Peter went away and wept bitterly. And in that moment, for the first time, Peter saw himself as he really was. He was a windbag. He was all talk. He was empty, empty like these nets.

That's Peter's life with Jesus as presented in the gospel of John, and if you break it down, you can see that it has two stages to it. First, before his denials, there was the optimistic idealistic season of his early discipleship; a season where he has his eyes on greatness. The season when he was going to hit a home run for Jesus. Then, after the denials, there is a season of brokenness and humiliation, a season of bitter weeping, a season where personal failure gnaws on his heart.

While on the outside these two seasons might look completely different from one another, they're really the same. The rash promises of his optimism and the bitterness of his failure come from the same place. Whether he's making rash promises or weeping bitterly at his failure, in both cases it is clear that Peter is focused on his performance. In both seasons, Peter is focused on his accomplishment. In the first season he is focused on his accomplishment and he's feeling strong and faithful. In the second season he's focused on his performance and he's full of shame. Another way to say this: in both seasons Peter depends upon himself, Peter puts his hopes in himself, Peter feels like it's up to him to prove the worth of his life to the world and to his God.

In our passage, we see Jesus changing Peter's perspective. He teaches Peter a new way of following. He moves Peter into a new season of discipleship, that is not so much based on personal performance. How does Jesus do that? Jesus does three things:

First, he confronts Peter and does so in a rather pointed way. Three times he asks Peter, "Simon son of John, do you Love me." And poor Peter can hardly fail to miss the point. Anytime anyone asks you a question three times, you know they have a serious concern. And in Peter's case he clearly sees that the three questions are parallel with his three denials. Jesus might as well have walked up to Peter and said, "Simon I want to talk to you about that incident at the High Priest's court." Jesus begins by reminding Peter of his weakness. He begins by reminding Peter of his brokenness. He begins by putting Peter on his knees. Jesus is uprooting Peter from his self-reliance and his concern about performance and accomplishment.

Second, Jesus restores Peter. At the end of the whole passage, he says to him, "Follow me." He repeats the words that he used to call Peter in the first place. He repeats these words as an assurance to show Peter that he has given him a fresh start. He is saying, 'Peter, we are back to the beginning, back before the rash promises, back before the great failure, we're wiping the slate clean. Follow me.' Peter must have wondered if he would ever again be worthy of hearing those words from Jesus. For Peter, those two words must have formed the most gracious imperative sentence he ever heard in his life. Never has an imperative sentence sounded so much like grace.

And third Jesus gives Peter a new task. Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. The old Peter was full of illusions of grandeur. The old Peter had his eyes set on mighty tasks and great, romantic conquests. He was going to walk on water. He was going to be the great hero. But now that he had tasted failure and emptiness, Jesus gives him simpler, humbler work: "Just feed my sheep Peter. You don't have to change the world. You don't have to conquer Rome. You don't have to be discipleship MVP. Just feed my lambs." Simple, humble, powerful work.

The old Peter might have balked at such a humble commission. He didn't want to be the one feeding the lambs and the sheep. He wanted to be CEO of the farm! He wanted to be head shepherd. But the new Peter, the wounded Peter, emptied of his pride and ambition, is ready for this humbler commission. The Old Peter wanted to dress himself like a man and go where he wanted. But the new Peter is learning to stretch out his hand and have the Lord lead him where previously, he did not want to go.

And what I want you to see is that this change in Peter is because of his emptiness. Peter creates this emptiness, but God uses it. Because of his wound, because of his emptiness, the brash young man who held up his fist ready to charge, is becoming the man who holds out open, empty hands and says, "Lord, where do you want me to go?" In the third season of his life Peter learns to be a broken man, doing humble service for the kingdom. It's not about his performance anymore.

We all need to learn that transition one way or another. In this congregation there are certainly a few people who are a little like Peter during the first season of his life. You are full of optimism and self-confidence and boldness. You are ready to leap a tall building in a single bound for Jesus. Most of you, not surprisingly, are young.

I think there are far more of us who feel more like Peter in the second season of his life. Peter after his denial. Peter walking back to the dugout after his strikeout, weeping bitterly. We are acutely aware of our limitations and our weakness, to the point that we're not sure that we're much good for anything. We may

not be weeping bitterly, but we don't have much self-confidence when it comes to our ability to serve God. In my experience most church members today are closer to empty Peter than Peter who was full of himself. When we try to recruit people for various roles within church leadership, I don't usually hear people say, 'Yes, I can do that, in fact I can do more. Sign me up wherever. I will not fail you!!' More often I hear, even from people who say yes, something more like "I'm not sure I can do that. I'm not sure I'm ready. I don't feel up to the job."

What this passage suggests is that, if you are feeling like your hands are empty, you may be exactly where you need to be. Years ago, someone sent me – and I can't remember who it was – a document that presented itself as a secret search committee report from a church looking for a pastor. The report included evaluations of the candidates under consideration. It made initial judgments about whether or not they were ready for the job: Here is what it said: Candidate 1. Noah: Lots of experience here but has shown a tendency toward unrealistic building projects. Also, some allegations about an alcohol problem. Candidate 2: Moses: A modest man, but not much of a public speaker, he even stutters sometimes. Has temper control issues. Some say he left an earlier church over a murder charge. Candidate 3: David: An amazing leader, would be a great candidate if not for the affair with neighbor's wife. Candidate 4: Jeremiah. Emotionally unstable, alarmist, negative, always complaining, has trouble dealing with people, alienates bigger donors. Candidate 5: Jonah. Ran away from the last call he received and had to be forced into service. Had some story about being swallowed by a fish. We hung up. Candidate 6: Paul: Brilliant man, but impossible to deal with. Hard on younger staff members. Long sermons have been known to put people to sleep. Candidate 7: Judas: Solid references. A steady plodder. Conservative. Good connections. Knows how to handle money. Inviting him to preach this Sunday. Possibilities here.

It's meant to be funny of course, but it makes a serious point. We think we know what strength looks like, but so often we are wrong. It wasn't the people who had their hands held high ready to charge whom God used. It wasn't people full of themselves. It was the empty ones. It was the weak ones. They were wounded. They were broken. And God took them by their empty hands and led them where they did not expect to go.

This is a deeply Biblical pattern. In Jesus' parable, it's not the full of himself Pharisee who's ready to be used (Dear Lord, I thank you that I am not a sinner like others), it's the tax collector who can only pray, "Lord have mercy." It's not conniving Jacob, stealing a blessing and lying to his father, who is in the best place to be used. It's broken Jacob, limping away from his struggle with God, his hip shattered. He's ready. It is not bold Peter swinging his sword in the garden who best understands the work of Jesus, it's empty, broken Peter who is ready to feed the lambs.

In all of these cases God has moved the person to a new spiritual stage. How do we describe this stage? It's like the words of Psalm 121 – "I lift up my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? My help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth." When you reach this stage, those words are not just words that you might memorize and recite to your Sunday school teacher so that you could get a gold star for your performance. Instead, these words have become a way of being. These words have become the way your soul carried itself into the world. When that happens, you haven't learned a new skill; you have become a new creation in Christ.

That's resurrection power. May that power be at work in us. May the risen Jesus take us by our empty hands and lead us in humble service.

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