

Amazing Grace

In our Scripture lesson this morning the setting is this: Peter has failed miserably as a follower, disciple, and friend of Jesus. Earlier on when Jesus had begun to reveal to His disciples that He was going to go up to Jerusalem to die, Peter had promised to protect Him. Peter had gone so far as to say that he, Peter, would be the last man standing. Even if every other one of Jesus' disciples should run away, he alone would remain true. He would be true even to death. On the night of Jesus' betrayal, however, Peter--not once but three times--swore with strong oaths that he had nothing to do with Jesus. He denied that he was one of Jesus' disciples. He denied that he ever knew Jesus. He abandoned his Lord, not even able to admit to a simple servant girl that he had once followed Jesus and been among the top three of Jesus' most intimate friends.

By the events we read of in today's Scripture passage, Peter's cowardice has been clearly demonstrated. It is public knowledge that he had promised too much and failed to keep his promise. He had run away, lied about his relationship with Jesus, swore a false oath, wimped-out when the going got tough. And now, as we find him in John 21, Peter is conflicted. On the one hand, now that Jesus is risen from the dead, and has appeared to them in the relative safety of Galilee, Peter wants to be with Him. Peter longs for their friendship to be restored; but, on the other hand, he is ashamed of what he has done. But does Jesus even know what Peter has done and if He knows, will Jesus take him back?

Perhaps you've been in a similar place at some time in your life. I know I have. I remember one Halloween when some friends and I were out tricking. We had been out earlier with the littler kids collecting candy; that was the treating part. But now we had gone back out or sneaked back out to seek mischief, to use our Halloween license to commit mayhem in the community. It was tradition. Legends passed down by the older kids in the neighborhood had to be honored and improved upon as much as possible. This was our time in the spotlight, our time to make names for ourselves as Halloween hoodlums.

Since I was the youngest in the small gang that went out that night, I was anxious to impress the other boys. In my enthusiasm, I got carried away and did some serious damage to a neighbor's new aluminum storm door. When the angry neighbor complained to my father the next afternoon and suggested that I might be the guilty party, my dad confronted me. I lied through my teeth and admitted just enough truth to sound sincere. Yes, I had been out throwing some corn and soaping

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a few windows, but I didn't damage any property. Dad went back to the neighbor and assured him of my innocence. I thought I was safe.

But then the older boys ratted me out. They told the truth to save their own hides, and now I was worse off than ever. Not only had I gotten carried away and damaged property that didn't belong to me, but I had lied to my father who had believed me and defended me, and who now had to deal with the embarrassment of having to go back to the offended neighbor and admit that his son was a criminal after all and a convincing liar to boot.

The worst part of the whole affair was not the punishment I received or the work I had to do to pay for the damage I had done. The worst part wasn't facing and apologizing to our neighbor. The worst part was knowing that I had shamed and disappointed my father. My worst fear was that I had destroyed our relationship and that he would never be able to trust me or be proud of me again.

Maybe you know the feeling: There is a lump in your throat the size of a watermelon. Your ears and eyebrows feel like they are on fire. You feel dirty and sick and there is nowhere to hide. You want to take back the words you said, undo the deed, find a way to make it better. And, not being able to do any of that you want to be punished. Your life is out of kilter and you know it cannot be right again until justice is served and relationships have been mended. Is this communicating? Do you know the feeling? What story would you tell to illustrate this point?

In the Scripture we read from John 21 last Sunday, we saw Peter's strange reaction to John's assertion that the man calling to them from the seashore was Jesus. John 21:7-8 say, "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. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards."

I said that Peter was conflicted. On the one hand, he couldn't wait to get to Jesus. He jumped into the water and swam to shore to be the first to make contact with Jesus. On the other hand, he wrapped his outer garment around him before jumping into the water. Though this would certainly impede his swimming, Peter did not want Jesus to see his nakedness; he did not want to be exposed before Jesus.

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This is the dilemma we face too, isn't it. We want and need intimate relationships. We want broken relationships to be mended. But, we don't want to uncover our hearts. We don't want anyone else to see our weakness or get a glimpse of our pain. We want a deeper relationship with God but we are afraid to burden Him with our sins or let Him into our wounds. We come to Him cloaked like a Star Trek "Cling-on Bird of Prey" or like Harry Potter hiding beneath the magic cloak that makes him invisible. We want to be close without being truly seen. Too many Christians settle for religion without substance. They want a "Stay Out of Hell Free" pass, but aren't willing to go through the death and resurrection of their souls needed to make them fit for Heaven.

But the good news here is that Jesus loves us too much to let us get away with our cover-ups. God didn't let Adam and Eve do it with fig leaves in the garden of Eden, and Jesus won't let Peter do it with his cloak in John 21. John 21:15 says, "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.'"

I wonder about the phrase, "more than these," "do you truly love me more than these?" What is Jesus talking about here? Peter had once claimed that his love for Jesus was deeper than that of the rest of the disciples. Is Jesus reminding Peter of this boast? Is Jesus pointing to the other disciples there and asking Peter, "Do you truly love me more than these?" I suspect this is the probable meaning of Jesus' question. But, maybe it is something else; maybe Jesus is motioning toward the fish and the boats. Maybe Jesus is asking Peter what he loves more--doing his own thing or obeying his Lord? "Do you love these things more than me?" Maybe Jesus is pointing to the articles of clothing that Peter has pressed around him and is referring to what they represent. "Do you love your own pride and dignity more than me?" "Do you love the lies that you use to keep yourself feeling safe more than you love me?"

I came to the conclusion a long time ago that the first thing God must have from us before He can give us any of His blessings is honesty. David prays in Psalm 51:6, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place." Getting right with God begins with telling Him the truth no matter how sad and humiliating that truth may happen to be. We cannot begin to be made whole and to know the abundant life Jesus promises us until we get real with Him in our heart of hearts. We cannot begin to know wisdom until we've come clean with God.

In John 21:16, Jesus presses Peter further: "Again Jesus said, 'Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.'" In Jesus' call to Peter to "feed my lambs" and "take care of my sheep," Jesus is reminding Peter that proving his love for his Lord is a matter of obedience to his Lord's commands. It's also a rather obvious confrontation of Peter's sin. Jesus had taught earlier that good shepherds stay and protect their sheep, while hired hands--who are only in it for the money--run off and abandon the sheep "when they see the wolf coming." Peter, as an inner-circle disciple, had responsibility for the rest. "If you love Me," says Jesus, "you won't run off and neglect my flock. If you love me, you will be the leader I called you to be; you will feed my lambs and take care of my sheep."

But Jesus is still probing Peter for something deeper--still stripping away Peter's defenses. John 21:17 says, "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.'" The key to understanding what Jesus is really getting at is the fact that Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me." By this simple device, Jesus lets Peter know that He knows what Peter has done. Now it's all out on the table. Peter knows that Jesus knows his cowardice and his betrayal. There is no more pretending, no more hiding, and no more running away. Now what am I suppose to do? Jesus said, "feed my sheep."

Can you see what's going on here? Peter is hiding because he thinks what he has done is too bad to be forgiven. He believes that his failure has disqualified him from ministry and made further intimacy with his Lord an impossibility. He believes that the only relationship he can now have with Jesus is a tenuous relationship, a surface relationship that can exist only as long as the whole truth remains covered. Maybe you think that. Maybe you believe that you might have had a wonderful relationship with God and might have been of great service to Him if you had not failed. If only you hadn't messed up the way you did you could be a holy person today, but now that you've done what you've done that's impossible.

If you have been thinking that, think again. Change your mind. You can have as much of God in your life now as you could ever have had. That's why Jesus came and that's why He died on that cross. Whatever you've done, however unforgivable and disqualifying it may seem to you, it has already been forgiven. The curtain dividing you from the Holy of Holies in the very heart of God has been torn asunder. Every wall that would block your way from intimacy with God has been torn

down in the death of Christ. The only thing that keeps you from enjoying a warm and open relationship with God and the only thing that prevents you from being clothed with His joy and keeps you from walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, are the things you have wrapped around your heart to protect yourself from being known, and to hide from God the things that He already knows. Jesus says to you, "behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone would hear my voice and open the door I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Do you hear Him knocking on your door this morning? Are you ready to open the door?

There is one more part to our Scripture portion this morning that we need to see. It tells us where we need to get to in our relationship with God. In John 21:18-19, Jesus says to Peter, "I tell you the truth, 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." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

If we know anything about the Christian faith, we know that death and resurrection are central themes. "Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, was buried, and rose to life again on the third day." In baptism, we declare that we are dying to ourselves and being raised to a new way of life through the power of the Holy Spirit. We speak of this as being converted or being born again. Experiencing this is the essence of our salvation. But what does this look like in our lives from day to day? Spiritually it means just what Jesus told Peter. We used to "dress ourselves;" that is, cover ourselves up, and we used to go where we wanted. But now that we belong to Christ we allow Him to clothe us with His righteousness and lead us--not to where we want to go--but where we need to go to glorify Him.

Are you ready for the walls you have erected to keep God out to be torn down so that you can receive His love? Are you ready to exchange the cover-ups of your own making for the complete and free covering of forgiveness offered you in Jesus Christ? Are you ready to give up your own way to live under the teaching of the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit?

If you are not ready for these things, will you pray for God to make you ready? If you are ready to surrender to Christ and to the life He offers you; or, if you have strayed and know you need to come back to Him, would you pray and agree to be His and to live under His direction from this moment on?

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John 21:15-19

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