

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“REDEEMING A FAILURE”  
John 21:1-19  
April 25, 2010  
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

We may find ourselves caught up in the whirlwinds of indifference and cruelty, but God stirs up love like fire in our hearts. Every person is born to love and to be loved. The life of faith is not meant to be joyless.

Peter’s encounter with the risen Christ on the seashore crystallized the meaning of discipleship for him. It all depends on loving Christ and those who belong to him. Christ himself furnished the pattern for us to follow.

We live in a success-oriented culture. It is not as important *what* you do, as that you are successful in doing it. In such an environment the unpardonable sin is failure. Failure is the worst of possibilities. It is thought to be better not to make the attempt than to fail. Yet God’s most beautiful work involves the redeeming of failures.

Misfortune has derailed many a dream. But personal or moral failure can mean the destruction of a life. Something we intended, or promised, to do, we failed to do. Failure is a missed target. Often success and failure are found in the same story. This is especially true of biblical stories, which are profoundly true to life. Abraham, Moses, David, and all the rest, are studies in ambiguity, in risings and fallings, in victory and defeat. Simon Peter belongs in this crowd, with all the rest of us. Because he did everything in a big way, his failures called for exceptional

redemption.

Chapter twenty-one of John is an epilogue to his Gospel. It not only concludes John's witness to the life of Jesus, but it rounds out the story of Peter in a dramatic and important way. Following his resurrection Jesus has already appeared to his disciples twice. Now the disciples are waiting for Jesus' further instructions. On this occasion Simon Peter and six other disciples are together beside the Sea of Tiberias, which was also called the Sea of Galilee and the Lake of Gennesaret. This large and beautiful lake has been the scene of many significant events in the disciples' life with Jesus. Today it remains a picturesque setting. The huge lake is set like a jewel in the surrounding mountains.

**Impulsive and impetuous, Peter says, "*I'm going fishing.*" The others go with him. Night is considered the best time to fish, but they have no luck. At daybreak someone on the shore calls to them saying they should cast their net on the right side of the boat. They do, and catch more fish than they can haul into the boat! One of the disciples suddenly realizes that the person on the shore is Jesus. "*It is the Lord!*" On the shore, Jesus builds a fire and prepares a breakfast of fish and bread for the disciples. The lesson from this passage is probably that, while Jesus' followers have the mission of continuing his work, without him they are powerless to fulfill their mission. It is an important lesson for us, too.**

**Breakfast with Jesus may have been a bit awkward. The implication is that the resurrection had both changed Jesus and left him unchanged. However, this scene becomes the setting for some unfinished business between Peter and Jesus.**

**At the Mount of Olives, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus said to his disciples, "*You will all fall away because of me this night.*" Peter declared, "*Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.*" Jesus said, "*This very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.*" Peter insisted, "*Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.*" Later that evening Peter was sitting in the courtyard of the high priest and a maid came up to him and said, "*You also were with Jesus.*" Peter denied it before them all, "*I do not know what you mean.*" Then, on the porch, another maid identified**

him, *“This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”* With an oath, Peter insisted, *“I do not know the man.”* Some bystanders then came to Peter and said, *“Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”* Then, invoking a curse on himself and swearing, Peter again said, *“I do not know the man.”* Then the cock crowed, and Peter went away weeping, guilty of a failure beyond his wildest imagination.

All of Peter’s intense guilt over such an unspeakable failure had doubtless consumed him since that night. How would he face Jesus? What would he say? After breakfast, Jesus took the initiative. He asked Simon three times, *“Do you love me?”* Each time Simon answered, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Three times the question was asked, and three times the answer was given. This litany of redemption in three exchanges was to cover Peter’s three denials. And beyond Peter’s affirmations, three times Jesus gave Peter a commission: *“Feed my lambs”; “Tend my sheep”; “Feed my sheep.”* In redeeming Peter’s failure, Jesus gives him more than an opportunity to reaffirm his love. He gives him a challenge, a calling, a mission. The remainder of Peter’s life is more than ample evidence of his transformation.

What about our failures? What has become of them? What have we done about them? Balzac said, *“We cannot examine our wounds; they hurt too much.”* Guilt often remains unexamined for precisely this reason. There is also the hope that if we ignore our negative feelings they will go away. It doesn’t work. There are some common ways of bearing one’s guilt. One is the vindictive solution, where we simply take out our guilt on someone else. Of course, whoever it is, it is the wrong person. What we are doing is projecting ourselves on to someone else and striking at ourselves there. A second way of bearing guilt is the self-accusatory mechanism. This involves blaming ourselves, not just for something we have done, but for everything that is wrong in the world! It is a way of punishing ourselves by taking on even more guilt. Leonard Woolf says we have the self-accusatory mechanism in common with the dog. *“It does not matter how you treat him or train him, the dog at once develops this sense of guilt.”* Some people feel this is what makes it possible to civilize dogs, while cats, lacking any sense of guilt, cannot be civilized!

In Christ we see that there is no successful way to *“bear”* our guilt, because we were not intended to bear it. In Christ we clearly see how unconditionally God loves us. Christ invites us to confess our failures and sins, but then to put these burdens down, knowing that it is not necessary to bear them any longer.

**In Christ we are invited to live forgiven. This is the meaning of grace and provides one of the purest freedoms we can know.**

Nothing is worse than failing at love. Perhaps that is why we seek love in the wrong ways and in the wrong places. Love is found in serving others. Jesus loved family and friends, aliens and strangers, opponents and enemies. His love was not reserved for only a few. Where we see groups, not just individuals, experiencing special needs, the work of love is to seek justice. Redeeming failures requires the unselfish work of love and justice.

John Wesley said; **“The world is my parish”**. I invite you this morning to become courageous in proclaiming the gospel for the transformation of the world. If you have become emboldened by your love for Christ to help change the world, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.