

Failing and Following

John 21:1-22

John Breon

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples in various places and ways. John has told about appearances that happened in Jerusalem. Now he recounts one that took place in Galilee.

In Matthew's Gospel, as the women left the tomb, Jesus met them and told them to tell the other disciples to go to Galilee, "and they will see me there" (Mt 28:10). So they went. But now what do they do?

Peter, impatient as usual and probably tired of waiting around, decides to go fishing. You can interpret that in different ways: He was going back to his old way of life. He was simply doing what he could while he waited for further instructions from Jesus. He was occupying himself to keep his mind off his failure and the feeling that he didn't really have a place in Jesus' kingdom and mission anymore. Or, it could be as simple as the fact that, even with Jesus crucified and risen, disciples still need to eat.

Other disciples go with Peter out on the boat. They catch nothing all night. They often fished at night on Lake Galilee so the fish wouldn't see the nets in the clear shallow water and so they would have fresh fish to sell in the morning.

Then, at dawn, they see Jesus standing on the shore, but can't make out who he is. He calls out to them, "You haven't caught anything have you?"

"No," they reply.

So he tells them to cast the net off the right side of the boat and see what happens. They do, and suddenly the net is so full of fish that they can't haul it into the boat.

The beloved disciple has an insight. He remembers something like this before. He recognizes the Stranger on the shore and he says to Peter, "It's the Lord!"

When Peter hears this, he too remembers. Why hadn't he thought of it before? The day Jesus first called Peter to follow him, Jesus had been sitting in Peter's boat teaching the crowds on the shore. Peter and his

friends hadn't caught anything the night before that either. It's interesting that in the gospels the disciples never catch fish without help from Jesus. That morning, more than three years ago, Jesus had told Peter to row out, and let down the nets for a catch. Peter had wondered what this teacher was doing telling him how to fish, but he did what Jesus said. And they caught so many fish that day that the nets started tearing and the boats started sinking. Peter knew he was in the presence of someone too great and good for him and he asked Jesus to leave him. That was when Jesus said, "Don't be afraid! From now on you will fish for people!" (Luke 5:1-11).

I like to look at the "follow me's" of Peter's life. There was that first time on the lake when he was called from fishing to be part of Jesus' mission.

Later, after Jesus had asked, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter had answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus talked to him and the others about "taking up your cross and following me." Peter then heard the call to follow Jesus in his suffering servanthood (Mt 16:15-26; there's a similar scene in John 6).

In the upper room, at the last supper, Jesus had said that they would all run away from him. Peter began making brash promises: "Even if they all leave you, I will never leave you! I will follow you to the death!" But, as Jesus predicted, Peter was unable on his own to live up to his commitment (Jn 13:36-38).

Peter has fished all night and caught nothing. All he has is a memory he'd like to throw back—the memory of denying Jesus. But Jesus now recalls what it was like when Peter first began following him so that Peter can hear the call for a new commitment to an old invitation.

When Peter hears John say, "It's the Lord" and realizes that it's true, he jumps into the water and swims to shore. He rushes to see Jesus. He comes wading along the beach. He hurries to where Jesus is and stands there dripping and shivering. And speechless. What can he say? How does he talk to his best friend whom he has failed so miserably?

I imagine Peter is relieved when the others get to shore with the boat and Jesus says to bring some of the fish they caught. Thankful for something to do, Peter goes to the boat and drags to shore the net full of

fish—153 big ones. Why is that number there unless someone who helped count them told this story?

Jesus has fixed breakfast for the disciples. He invites them to come and eat. There is a *charcoal fire*. The only other time a charcoal fire is mentioned is in the high priest's courtyard where Peter stood warming himself and denying that he knew Jesus.

Jesus has helped Peter recall a precious memory, his call, and now a painful one, his failure. Perhaps as Peter sits staring into the fire he relives his call, remembers how Jesus had called him to follow. But he also remembers that horrible night in the court yard. Jesus was inside, on trial for his life, and Peter was outside, telling the people around him that he didn't even know that man who was on trial. "Oh, Lord! How could I do that? I'm sorry, Lord!" But there are no words for Peter's sorrow.

Now, Jesus doesn't open this wound to make it worse, but to heal it. Restoration, coming back from failing begins with recalling the failure, at the point of brokenness. Three times Peter had denied Jesus. Now, three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?"

I imagine after they finished eating, some of them started to clean the fish and the nets. Peter may have been about to go tend to the boat when Jesus says, "Let's go for a walk." They start down the shore in the early morning light, with the breeze from the lake rustling their robes and beards.

Jesus calls him "Simon." That was Peter's name before he became a follower of Jesus. He may be wondering if he still is a disciple. Jesus says, "Do you love me more than these?" Does he mean more than these others do? Earlier Peter had promised to follow Jesus all the way to death even though all the others left him. Now, humbled by his failure, Peter doesn't need to compare his love and commitment with that of the others.

Or, does Jesus mean, do you love me more than all these things? They're standing on the shoreline of Peter's life. All that he had grown up with and that was dear to him was all around. And the question came, "More than these?"

Jesus comes to us and calls us to love him wholeheartedly. Not that all those things and people are unimportant, but only God can be God.

Only God can hold the priority in our lives. Everything else takes its place in relationship to God.

Has Jesus stood on the shoreline of your life—is he there now—asking, “Do you love me more than these?”

Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now he has the opportunity to confess Jesus three times. Three times Jesus asks Peter to affirm his love.

And Peter does. “Lord, you know everything—you know my heart, how I really feel, my love for you, my real desire to serve you.”

How kind and gracious of Jesus. What a healing experience for Peter. Jesus meets us at the point of our failure and begins healing us, giving us the opportunity to reaffirm our love and commitment and to make a new start.

Nancy and I were on a seminary internship in San Saba, TX. We had chosen the seven month instead of the year-long internship. We would finish there in December and return to Dallas for one more semester of school, then I would graduate and we would move to Missouri to start pastoring. In those seven months we made good friends, had some wonderful experiences, had some success in ministry as well as some difficulties, and we learned a lot.

Toward the end of that time, the pastor of the church, who was my supervisor, asked me to consider staying on through the spring semester. That wasn't what we had planned. But we thought about it and prayed about it. One day in my devotions, the Scripture was where Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross. The prayer in the book began, “Lord Jesus, what crosses are you asking me to carry?” As soon as I read that, the word “stay” came to my mind. Almost as soon as I heard that word, I began to question it.

Was that God telling me what to do? Was it just my own desire to remain with some friends? What was going on?

We decided not to stay, but to continue with our original plan. But that prayer and that word haunted me. Had we made the right decision? Had I failed to follow God's direction?

I don't know. But I have discovered God's grace showing us that really “way leads on to way.” I've found that God has a perfect will for us starting

right now, even if we have disobeyed before. I've been encouraged by the insight that God's will for us includes many good options if we have the basic commitment to love and serve God. I've experienced God's grace in ministry opportunities in all the churches we've served since leaving San Saba. We are not told what might have been. But we are given the opportunity to go on from where we are in the grace of God.

Here's another personal example of that. The first church I served out of seminary was a large suburban church in Kansas City. I was one of the associate pastors. One day a woman came in to talk to me. She wasn't a member of the church, but she had visited some and she was looking for some help. She was depressed and struggling with some things in her life. After our conversation, she started attending the Inquirers' class for people who were interested in learning more about the church and becoming members of it.

She came to my office again one day shortly before she was to join the church with the group from the class. She was still struggling with her faith and with depression over some events in her life. Some of the pain she had brought on herself by some bad decisions. I was getting ready to leave for church camp. I wasn't giving her my full attention. I wasn't very sympathetic to her pain because of her own actions that had led to a lot of it—I was doing some judging that I should not have done. I told her to come on and join the church the next Sunday and we would talk more after that.

Later in the week, the church secretary called me at camp and told me that this woman had been found dead—she had killed herself. I began thinking of all the things I should have said or done. I started questioning whether I really cared about people and whether I should be in ministry. I tried to work through all those feelings. I realized I wasn't totally responsible for her decision. Even if I had done and said all the things I thought of later, she still may have ended her life.

But talk about a failure haunting you. Every now and then, I would think about her and feel guilty, ashamed, inadequate. I carried those feelings for years.

I don't share that with you so that you'll avoid coming to me for counseling. But I want to show how God helped bring me back from that. Some years after that experience, I was using the book *Reflections for Ragamuffins* for my daily devotions. It's a collection of writings by Brennan Manning. One day's reading starts with some questions about failure:

Suppose for a moment that in a flash of insight you discovered that all your motives for ministry were essentially egocentric, or suppose that last night you got drunk and committed adultery, or suppose that you failed to respond to a cry for help and the person committed suicide. What would you do?

Would guilt, self-condemnation, and self-hatred consume you, or would you jump into the water and swim a hundred yards at breakneck speed toward Jesus? Haunted by feelings of unworthiness, would you allow the darkness to overcome you, or would you let Jesus be who he is—a Savior of boundless compassion and infinite patience, a Lover who keeps no score of wrongs? (*RFR*, Sept. 17).

That word delivered me from condemnation.

What about the dozens of other failures, all the sins and failures in our lives? Jesus can forgive us, restore us and give us a new start—every time!

Peter's experience there by the lake helped prepare him for Pentecost when, filled with the Holy Spirit, he boldly proclaimed the good news of Jesus. After being forgiven for his denial, reaffirmed like this and then empowered with the Spirit, do you think Peter ever again missed a chance to speak up for Jesus? Let's take advantage of every opportunity to speak a word for Jesus.

Not only does Jesus allow Peter to confess his love three times, but he also tells him, "Feed my sheep." Peter still had a place in the kingdom, in the purpose, in the mission of Jesus. Jesus calls Peter to follow in serving others. Jesus trusted Peter and called him to share the work of a shepherd, of caring for his people.

Our call to follow Jesus includes the call to care for his people. The love we have for Jesus is expressed in love for others. Loving Jesus and his people is the only adequate motive for following Christ. It will stick when life is not exciting or things go wrong.

If we're not leaving self-centeredness behind we're not really following like we need to. The goal of discipleship is to be like Jesus, which includes allowing God to work through us to meet the needs of others.

Even more, Peter is called to follow Jesus to death. It's as though Jesus is saying, "I know you denied me, but someday you *will* die for me. Peter, your discipleship is going to cost you your life—follow me!" Later, Peter would write, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Christian discipleship is becoming like Jesus in love and service, in death and resurrection.

Jesus repeats the call to follow. Peter notices the beloved disciple tagging along and asks about him. Jesus essentially says, "My plans for him are not your concern—you follow me." We are not told God's plans for other people. Just hear the call of Jesus to you.

The old call came to Peter again. It comes to us again and again.

Every time we sin and need a fresh start

Every time we fail and need to begin again

At every fork in the road

When there is a decision to be made

Whenever there is an opportunity to serve or share

Follow me!

Two words—simple enough to be understood and obeyed in an instant; but two words so rich and deep that [we] may easily spend [our] whole life with them as [our] guide and never know all their significance. Two words—*follow Me*. (Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 145-46)

Whatever you've done, wherever you've been, however you've failed—you can start to follow Jesus right now.

When we choose to follow him and give ourselves to follow him, Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit so we can follow. Without the Spirit, we're like Peter in the upper room—making brash promises we can never keep. With God's Spirit—the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead—we are able to follow Jesus and to serve him as we care for others.