

“Saved by the Sea”

Luke 5 and John 21

Series: Summer Getaways Week 9

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Anyone else here have regrets? Things you wish you didn't do? Words you wish you didn't say? Actions you wish you did or didn't take? Over the years I've certainly accumulated my fair share, but thankfully none quite like this one. A record executive thought guitar bands were going out of style. So when he got a tape from one such band -- he quickly passed on it. Turns out Guitar bands weren't cold, they were hot. That passed-on band was the little-known English guitar group, The Beatles. Dick Rowe went to his grave being known as “the record executive who turned down the Beatles!” Talk about regret!!

One of the things I love best about the Bible is that God uses real people, not white-washed saints, to tell his story and carry out his work. The Bible is full of flawed people who make big mistakes, often again and again, and are filled with BIG regrets. Yet God doesn't allow those mistakes to automatically disqualify them. God can use even the most flawed people to fulfill his purposes.

Today we're going to look at my favorite disciple - Simon Peter, a man who certainly had his share of flaws. Simon, as he was known back then, first meets Jesus along the banks of the Jordan River. Simon, his brother Andrew, and a few friends are there to listen to the teachings of the prophet John the Baptist who had just proclaimed Jesus as “The Lamb of God.” Andrew introduces his brother to Jesus who says, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas.” John 1:42. Cephas in Greek is Petros or Peter, meaning Rock. The Rock.

Peter and his friends make their living on the Sea of Galilee. Early one morning as Jesus is teaching along the shoreline, large crowds begin to press in on him. He sees at the water's edge two boats, left there by Peter and his companions who are washing their nets. They are dirty and weary -- they had fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus gets into the boat belonging to Peter and asks him to row him out a bit from the shore, so he can preach more easily to the crowds.

When Jesus finishes preaching, he says to Peter, “Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.” Luke 5:4. Peter hesitates, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything.” Peter was probably hoping Jesus would say *Oh right, you're probably tired. We can do this another day.* Nope; Jesus doesn't let Peter or us off the hook that easily! Heavy sigh. “But because you say so, I'll drop the nets.” Luke 5:5. Have you ever felt God nudging you to do something when you REALLY didn't want to? Maybe you're tired like Peter, or busy like everyone or have a nice organized day planned. I like to say God watches me make a To Do List and then chuckles. *Oh you're so funny Linda...I have better plans.* And he puts someone on my heart or I get a call, *Can you help....* Almost always I am blessed by the interruption. Occasionally I need to make sure it's God nudging, not just me just looking for an excuse to ignore my ToDo's!

When Peter and his friends reach the spot Jesus suggested, “They caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.” Luke 5:6. Peter and his fellow fishermen would have missed a miraculous blessing if Peter had not replied “But because you say so!” Realizing this, Peter falls at Jesus’ feet, saying “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” Luke 5:8 Peter’s response reflects what the Bible describes as the “fear of the Lord” -- a reverence, awe but also an overwhelming sense of unworthiness. Jesus responds, “Don’t be afraid. From now on, you’ll be fishing for people.” Luke 5:10 Over and over again the gospels proclaim that message - fear not. Following Jesus can seem risky, scary, but just as he assures Peter, he promises to be with us, giving us strength and courage in spite of our fears. As soon as they reach shore, Peter, Andrew, James and John leave their nets and their lives behind to follow Jesus.

When Jesus gave Simon his new name of Peter, he saw in him the Rock, the leader he would be. Peter was strong and opinionated, impulsive and passionate. He gives up everything to follow Jesus and strives to do things God’s way. But his tongue and his fear often get in his way, causing “The Rock” to crumble with many fumbles, a few failures and one huge regret.

One night the disciples are out on the sea as a huge storm hits, tossing their little boat violently on the thrashing waves. Knowing their distress, Jesus walks out on the raging water to rescue them. The disciples, however, are terrified, thinking they are seeing a ghost. “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid!” Jesus calls out. Only Peter is bold enough to speak up - “Lord if it’s you, order me to come to you on the water.” Matthew 14:27-28. Think about that for a minute -- what a crazy thing to say -- asking Jesus to order him, Peter, to walk on water? Why not ask Jesus to come into the boat and save them? Peter was stepping out in faith, trusting that if Jesus called him to do it, he could. Jesus said “Come!” and fixing his eyes on Jesus, Peter steps out and begins walking on water to his master. As soon as he takes his eyes off Jesus, he begins to sink and fear takes over. “Lord save me!” Peter yells. Immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and lifts Peter up. “You of little faith,” he gently admonishes, “Why did you doubt?” Matthew 14:31. Just after we see Peter take two remarkable steps forward in faith, he takes one giant step back, sinking in fear and water. Maybe that’s why we love him so -- he reminds us of ourselves. We try to follow Jesus, but when we take our eyes off him we lose our boldness as the world tells us all the reasons we can’t.

Another time Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter immediately jumps in with the answer “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replies, “Blessed are you Peter, son of John, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood but by my father in heaven!” Matthew 16:16-17. Give that #1 student a gold star for the day! Way to Rock it Peter!

Ah, but the day is not quite over -- a short time later Jesus tells the disciples he must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed and then raised to life on the third day. Jesus says **MUST** go as this was part of God’s plan to redeem us. Peter takes Jesus aside and corrects him, ‘Heaven forbid, Lord; this will never happen to you.’ He just doesn’t get it! Jesus turns to Peter and says “Get away from me Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not God’s.” Matthew 16:22-24. Again, another step back Peter. But his biggest failure is still to come.

Jesus knew it was almost time for his ministry here on earth to come to an end. He and the disciples gather together for the Passover feast. Jesus looks at Peter and says something rather bewildering, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.” Luke 22:31-32. What was Jesus talking about? Peter boldly replies, “Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you and even die with you.” But Jesus says, “Peter let me tell you something. Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you know me.” Luke 22:33-34. Can you imagine how Peter feels? No way -- not me! I am Peter the Rock!

Later that night Jesus is betrayed by Judas and handed over to the high priest's servants. The soldiers arrest Jesus and lead him to the high priest's home. Peter follows at a distance. It's a chilly evening, the guards light a fire in the middle of the courtyard. Others gather with the soldiers to warm themselves. Peter joins them, trying to hide how nervous he fears. He wants to see what will happen to Jesus but doesn't want to get arrested himself. A servant girl won't stop staring at him. He tries to hide his face. She points at him saying, “This man is one of Jesus' followers. Peter acts bewildered -- “Woman, he says, I don't even know him.” Peter sinks his head down in his cloak as he tries to make himself invisible. The chatter continues as Peter's angst grows. A little while later someone else says, “You are also one of them.” “Man I am not!” Peter emphatically denies.

Finally, guards emerge from the doorway, shoving Jesus in front of them. Peter's shocked at how terrible his friend looks. “There's the prisoner they arrested,” shouts a man. “Yep, that's him!” barks another. “And you know what – this guy here - pointing directly at Peter – was with him. I'm sure of it.” “I don't know what you are talking about,” Peter bellows, turning to run away. Just then the raspy gargle of a rooster crowing breaks over the noise. Peter stops dead in his tracks. He remembers the conversation at dinner. Peter boasted, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison.” Jesus gently replying, “Peter before the rooster crows in the morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.” Luke 22:54-62.

It hits him like a boulder smashing down - he's done just that – denied Jesus. Exactly 3 times. Peter turns back to look at Jesus, now in shackles, standing nearby in the courtyard. Jesus gazes back at him, staring deep into his eyes. The look is full of sorrow yet deep love, but to Peter it feels like a spear piercing his soul, confirming his self-accusation. Peter has let his friend and master down in his most desperate hour. He acted cowardly. Dishonest. Unfaithful. The shame is overwhelming. Everything appears hopeless to him now. Not waiting to see what terrible things the guards will do to his friend, Peter rushes out of the courtyard. He stumbles through the dark streets of Jerusalem sobbing in shame and grief.

After Peter fled from that Courtyard, Jesus was condemned, beaten, and crucified. Only John alone among the remaining disciples had the courage to stand with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross. None of the gospels tell us where Peter or the other disciples were that terrible day. Maybe Peter was watching from a safe distance. Or maybe he couldn't stand to watch and instead remained hiding in grief, regret and shame.

After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to his followers several times. His very last Resurrection appearance in the Gospels brings things full circle for Peter, the now decidedly rushed Rock.

One night after supper, Peter decides to return to his old life, fishing on the shores of Galilee. We aren't told why - maybe he had given up -- feeling like his betrayal was so big, that he would never get past the regret and be the leader Jesus told him he'd be. Several of the remaining disciples go with him. They set out in their boat, fish all night and, just as on the day Jesus called them some three years ago, they catch nothing. It is now early the next morning and they are a short distance from shore. They see a man standing around a fire, cooking fish, who shouts out to them, "Catch anything?" "No," they respond. The man shouts back, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" When they do, they can't haul in the net, there are so many fish! John 21:5-6.

The disciple John instantly knows who the man is on the shore -- he's the same man who told Peter to cast out the nets into the deep water three years earlier, a catch that changed their lives forever. "It's the Lord!" John says to Peter, who for some reason has yet to figure this out -- maybe too busy feeling sorry for himself? Peter is so excited he jumps overboard, running as fast as he can in the shallow water to hug Jesus -- so happy to see his beloved master. John 21:7-8. His joy is overwhelming. He stops suddenly as he remembers his terrible betrayal and the look on Jesus' face. He's so ashamed and embarrassed. The other disciples don't know what he's done. Has Jesus come to expose him? Why else would he be here? Peter now finds it hard to face Jesus -- the tension is killing him. Jesus has prepared breakfast and invites Peter and the other disciples to join him around the fire.

After they eat, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Yes, Lord," Peter replies, "you know I love you." "Then feed my sheep," Jesus tells him.. Not once, not twice, but three times Jesus asks the question: "Do you love me?" And not once, not twice, but three times Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." John 21:15-17.

The exchange is uncomfortable for Peter, but he doesn't try to run away -- *Hey let me go clean up this fish mess OK?* He doesn't try to justify his denials -- *Jesus, you know I was with you all the way -- I just panicked in the moment.* And He doesn't try to make himself look better by blaming others -- *Well at least I followed you to Caiaphas' house -- they all fled. What do you have to say about them?* No, Peter faces Jesus square on and answers his question, letting Jesus's words convict his sins. Over and Over.

Do you ever downplay your sins or maybe even deny them all together -- *What me? I don't have anger issues. Everyone else is just out to get me. Gossiping is really not a sin. I'm sorry she overheard us, but she really is a busybody. Hey, at least I'm not as bad as THAT guy. I didn't actually cheat on my wife.* Peter teaches us we need to get right with God.. Confess our sins without trying to justify or explain away. Honest, sincere, confession.

And then accept His grace. When Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” he’s reassuring Peter: “Because I still love you.” When we feel loved and secure, we can find the courage to face our sins and move on. Jesus doesn’t chastise Peter, he doesn’t rehash what happened, he doesn’t blow it off as no big deal, he doesn’t give Peter the cold shoulder. No, Jesus affirms his love for Peter and gives Peter the opportunity to affirm his love back. He **confirms** the relationship and offers undeserved grace. And Peter accepts it with his heartfelt response.

But Jesus does something else too... Jesus Confirms Peter’s **Purpose**. After each affirmation of love comes this charge: “Feed my sheep.” Jesus isn’t asking Peter to take over a sheep farm but to be the leader Jesus had proclaimed him to be. The Rock. *Peter, you still have a purpose to fulfill. Your mistakes did not disqualify you. I want you to lead and care for my followers.*

Three questions. Mirroring three denials. And most importantly, three redeeming confirmations.

There is so much that happens in this short exchange we might miss the importance of Jesus’ command to care for his sheep. Jesus’ love for us was demonstrated on the cross. Our love for him is demonstrated by our care for others. It’s that simple. If we want to be followers of Jesus, we need to care for his people. That might mean literally feeding them, as many do here with things like Dinner Ministry or the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Or it might look like praying or spending time with someone who is sick or lonely or in prison. Or inviting the kid who is always eating alone at lunch to come and sit with you and your friends. Or providing shelter for those who don’t have a place to lay their head by helping out at Habitat or Code Blue. What we do for others, Jesus says, is an expression of our love and devotion to him.

I think we can all see ourselves in Peter’s story. We love God and sing praises to him exuberantly. We strive to be like him, yet we so easily fail. We get back on track and fumble again. But friends, just like Peter, if we get real with Jesus and confess our sins, he will forgive our sins. No matter how flawed we are, He will use us to share his love in a world that so badly needs him.

For several years I had the privilege of serving with our Senior High on the Mission Trip to the Bahamas. Not only was it a time to help others, it was also a time to focus on God and deepen our relationships with him. Everyone’s favorite night was the Beach Worship Service. At the end of the night, we spread out across the sand to take time to get honest with God -- to talk to him and share our concerns, our regrets and to ask for forgiveness. Many of us wrote our sins in the sand as we prayed to receive the grace God promises. Soon the waves rolled in, washing away our regrets/our sins. It was a powerful visual reminder of God’s redemptive grace and love.

What Jesus did for Peter -- oh so flawed Peter -- he wants to do for you. If you have made mistakes, have regrets, Jesus has an invitation. Not an invitation to jump through religious hoops, but an invitation to breakfast. God has made a way for you to turn around and come home. He wants to confirm his forgiveness of your sins. Confirm his love for you. Confirm your calling. Will you let him?