

This account of how Jesus forgives Peter and turns him around and gets him back into the game, back into life, probably speaks to us for a number of different reasons:

--Peter was an "All-American" fellow, the kind our culture especially admires; self-made, energetic, with leadership qualities galore—a "take charge" kind of guy

--Peter was broken, crushed, shocked: it had gone terribly wrong; his potential had gone sour, and now only mocked him. His life changed so quickly—gone—within 24 hours—and he had only himself to blame

--Peter is now feeling sadly distant from his Lord. It had once been different, and he had never loved anyone as he had loved Jesus, but "it just hadn't worked out." No sense crying over spilt milk, assigning blame. For whatever reason, "it just hadn't worked out"

--Once so very long ago (half a lifetime ago, though maybe it was 2 weeks or a month on the calendar) Peter had promised to follow his Lord, the Light of his life. He had tried, had enjoyed the ride very much, but proven himself unworthy, unable to be His faithful follower

--In Peter's case, of course, he had abjectly betrayed His Lord and therefore everything in his life which brought him the greatest depth and joy and satisfaction; there was no bottom to the depth of his sorrow, no way for him to break out of his darkness

Millions of Americans can relate to Peter. At some point in our life we encounter Jesus; we come with thanksgiving and tears into His liberating forgiveness, His love...we offer Him our lives, or at least a promissory note...we begin to make some headway where we had been blocked, where we had been caught in our own inner darkness...until it gets too hard, too real, too "close to the bone," too personal, too painful, too demanding—so we sooner or later ease back into doing what we know: making a living, watching TV, amusing ourselves, feeding our addictions to comfort, to security, to need to control.

We go back fishing again, half hoping Jesus will leave us alone, half fearing Jesus will leave us alone. (The "Hound of Heaven" will not.) But if we pay attention, we may learn from how Jesus dealt with Peter, first among His followers, and how He managed to give Peter back his life and his purpose and his future.

One theme we note: Jesus is the One who takes the initiative to restore Peter and those seven in the boat fishing in Galilee. (10 times in 15 verses: e.g. Jesus "showed Himself," "said," made breakfast, coached them what to do, went on a walk with Peter.) We are no longer surprised; of course Jesus takes the initiative (Jesus has taken initiative to become human, and live among us, somehow God in this earthly dimension ["The Word became flesh, and lived among us..."])

All our life is a question of how we do or do not respond to Jesus; to His Holy Spirit now alive, at loose, among us, within us. Our most important disciplines exist to allow us to respond to the love and mercy of God; they exist to remind us and teach us how to put aside the chatter of this world, the static, in order to be able to tune to the

frequency of the restoring love of God—the initiating love, the divine Word, the Holy Spirit—whose opinion of us and whose verdict about us is ultimately the only way out of our own predicament.

But the more we think about Jesus taking the initiative toward Peter, toward you, toward me, the more unusual it becomes. Jesus is not the One who has ruptured the relationship with Peter; Jesus is not the One whose life and ego and psyche has imploded (that would be Peter); Jesus is not the One who has turned away, who has turned His back on His friend.

Jesus is not the One who remains lukewarm, one foot in, one foot out of His Kingdom for years on end. Jesus *is* the One who loves Peter, and each one of us, far too much to allow us to enjoy this estrangement into which we so easily slide.

Jesus, thru His Holy Spirit, keeps coming after us (why are you here this morning? Why do you bother, why do you keep struggling so?) The Holy Spirit keeps after us—to bring us back, bring us Home, bring us back into right relationship with God.

We’re told “Jesus stood on the beach”—it sounds easy enough. But He was last seen close to 100 miles away. Jesus may have been waiting all night to spot their boat, and how many days, nights before that? (He had no way to text message to see where the boys would be.) He set out, hoping, determined to track them down. And not in order to berate Peter, as we might expect of anyone else.

Jesus was there on the shore to continue the makeover, the new future He still had for Peter. The process had begun wordlessly back when Peter was at the very point of denying Him.

But first let’s review; Jesus and Peter go back to the beginning of His ministry, by shore of the Sea of Galilee and now it comes full circle. You remember Jesus called His 12 followers; there was zealous Peter: “Yes, Lord! I will follow You.”

Jesus had acknowledged Peter’s response when He had asked His followers what people were saying about Him, then what they thought about Him. It was Peter who put words to their faith, and Jesus acknowledged His confession. “Peter, I’m going to call you “the Rock.”

Remember, in Luke 5, another foreshadowing of this incident. Then also the disciples had been fishing at night, to no avail. Jesus meets them, instructs them, and provides them with an overwhelming catch of fish. Peter alone “gets it”—Peter senses the depth of the love of Jesus and the power of God in Him to provide such blessing. The contrast is too much for him; his darkness too dark in this blazing Light from above. Peter alone crumples to his knees, the only fitting response for any of us who “gets it,” who allows His light and His love to enter in behind our normal walls of defense.

You know how this principle works: Peter’s betraying His Lord wouldn’t have seared him so very deeply had he not experienced the love of His Lord so very deeply. Just recently, as Peter had been betraying Jesus in the courtyard—Jesus was courageously standing up to His captors, the powers of Rome and of the Temple, while at the same moment Peter, having been accused by a serving girl, was outside denying Him.

Jesus keeps taking initiative to offer us divine forgiveness, to make us new.

The tragedy is that this is not usually enough. We say we want more of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of heaven, and we do—the same as Peter did. We want closer relationship with Jesus, and we even want to influence others to join Him also, to be about His work in this world.

But at the same time we are slow to jump into His Kingdom with both feet
--we hold back: we want to keep earning enough in this world so that we feel
secure;
--we hold back: we want to find happiness thru a succession of pleasures
--we hold back: we want to keep controlling others and our environment and our
future and our own life

We grow more and more spiritually schizoid; the months, the years go by...
Our indecisive decision becomes in fact a decisive decision:
“Yes, Jesus, but not yet, not fully, not now, not me...”

We leave Jesus little choice but to get our attention in a more immediate way: where we
lack, where we hurt—where our practiced defense cannot totally shut Him out.

“Children...I notice you have caught no fish, have you?”

“Children...I notice you are not living in My perfect peace”

“Children...I notice your marriage is strained”

“Children...I notice your schedules are out of control, you will not set appropriate
boundaries, you are frantic and frazzled with no time left over for what’s most
important”

“Children...I notice you work so diligently to make far more money than you
need to live on, which would be fine, except that your spending does not bring
glory to Me nor strengthen My Church nor reflect My love into the suffering of
the world

“Children...I notice you are reacting out of your fear rather than acting in trust

“Children...I notice you are apparently helpless to change your patterns in any
meaningful way...”

Jesus knows we will naturally tend to focus on where we’re strong; He can only
enter in where we acknowledge we are weak. (“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”)

I came across a feature about Coach Leroy Galloway, 16 times the PA state track
and field team champion, now about to retire from his career. A sophomore named
Aaron Dabney had shown up for track practice for his first time, wanting to become a
hurdler. The coach had recruited the entire girl’s team to witness this student’s first
attempt to leap over a hurdle. “Go over it, Aaron: I know you’re going to fall.” Sure
enough—the recruit falls down. But then the article continues, “Coach Galloway
extended his hand to help Dabney up and said, ‘Once you fall, and everybody falls, you
can learn. Now, let’s learn to hurdle.’” (*Sports Illustrated*, May 2007)

Over the years, an awful lot of those students have learned to hurdle, and fast—
but not until they also fall and learn they need a little coaching.

Jesus has gone all that way to Galilee extend His hand, to help Peter stand back
up after his life-threatening fall. It had been devastating for Peter.

During the Last Supper Jesus was explaining the difficulties He would be soon
facing, and Peter spoke up. Peter had promised, even boasted: “These others may fail
You, but not me; I am the Rock; You can count on Me, Lord...” And then that three-fold
betrayal: the Great Peter backing down, selling His Savior down the river when the
serving girl accuses him “I’m sure it was you I saw with Him—you even have a Galilean
accent, see?” “Quiet, woman...I don’t even know the man.” “The Lord turned and
looked at Peter...And he went out and wept bitterly.”

Jesus hadn't said a word. He had looked Peter in the eye, thru the iron grating fencing the courtyard in the Praetorium. But now, in the gospel account, He has tracked down Peter nearly 100 miles away, some weeks later. He has come after Peter to offer His forgiveness, to offer to Peter a new future.

His eyes were dry, but deep down I don't suppose Peter had quit weeping from moment to this, when finally Jesus comes near and calls out to him.

The assumption is that Peter is still shell-shocked as they're back fishing. He had quit Jerusalem; taken a medical/psychological leave from being the Great Peter, the Rock, the Leader; the burden was too heavy for Peter to bear. So he had put Jesus and His Church and His Kingdom on indefinite leave.

He had come back home; back to where he felt more secure in the world, where he could earn a living, back to where he wouldn't have to deal with Jesus and his own colossal failure and his unshakable sense of shame.

Peter was back fishing.

(Many of you and I know what it is to have been encountered by the risen Christ at some point earlier in our lives, and we really "got into it," and the Christian life was so exciting—thank God many of you are right here still—excited, alive—but some it got threatening, and you got disappointed. Maybe someone let you down, maybe the church you knew did not reflect the love of God very well, maybe you just moved on to other things...

But I hope this very morning every one of us is so very aware, so excited and grateful that the Holy Spirit of Jesus has been tracking us, patiently following us; has called out to us, called us by name from the shore close by; has been gently reminding us we have caught no fish lately—but still Jesus keeps showing us

--how gently He lifts us up from our fall (He will not quench a smoking wick—when He lifts us up, He motivates us, encourages us)

--how freely He has already made the next breakfast, and invites us into His bounty

--how surely He has drawn near to share the heavy burdens we have been carrying

--how we feel no shame when He forgives us our sin ("Is there no one then left to condemn you? Neither do I; go now and sin no more...")

Jesus patiently sets us right; He reminds us

--when we had been praying for peaceful circumstances that instead He wants to bring us His peace in our every circumstance

--when we had been praying to lose those extra pounds to be lookin' good for summer He wants us to quit obsessing about how we look and pay attention to how intimately He knows us and how much He loves us

--when we had been praying for more He wants us to learn that we have plenty when we have Him

We just heard Jesus call these grown men (not that they had always acted so) as "children"—not because he thinks they're 6 years old but because Jesus kept looking, kept seeing behind the betrayal, behind the manners, the fear, the ego jockeying, behind the rudeness or greed or self-centeredness or hardness or sin. Jesus keeps seeing a child

of God full of potential and promise: “Behind people’s grumpiest poses or most puzzling defense mechanisms... Jesus saw a little child who hadn’t been loved enough and who had ceased growing because those around Him ceased believing in him.” (Brennan Manning, *the Importance of Being Foolish*, p 101)

However successful or confident, however reluctant or cruel we may appear— Jesus keeps seeing a child created in the image of God with a heart for love and a God-given capacity for creativity and warmth and faithfulness. Jesus keeps seeing the diamond hiding in the coal. Jesus keeps seeing you as you will become, given the constancy and warmth of His love. He does not love us with a naïve optimism which cannot see or acknowledge evil—nobody has ever known about evil as Jesus does—but Jesus simply chooses to keep seeing deeper behind the evil, behind the shell, behind our defensive walls.

Jesus keeps seeing Peter as a leader, as a faithful follower, as a Rock. Peter can’t believe this any more, but Jesus never stops believing it. Peter had probably thinking Jesus was far away from him and his friends—back in Jerusalem, thinking about other things, visiting other more worthy and loyal disciples.

But Jesus had never quit thinking about Peter, never quit seeing him in His full capacity—accepting and fulfilling his God-assignment.

Peter thinks he’s fit to go back to fishing—while Jesus still sees him as the Rock of Christ’s Church the earthly shepherd of the sheep.

What does Jesus see you as doing from now on with the years of your life remaining to you? What do you see yourself doing?

Jesus still needs to convince Peter of his destiny, his God-future; to persuade Peter to see himself, his value, his usefulness, his future the way God sees him rather than the way Peter sees himself. So once more Jesus takes the initiative: after breakfast, “Peter, let’s go for a little walk...”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I do.” (But now Peter answers with humility; no brash promises that he will outshine the others; no comparisons this time.) “Then feed my sheep: become the pastor I already chose you to be; become the pastor you already agreed to be; become the pastor I know you can be...”

You know this three-fold repetition mirrors Peter’s three-fold rejection of Jesus. And by the time Jesus is done, Peter is fully reinstated, fully recommissioned, fully restored, fully made new—in a way he can understand and act upon.

Only now [v 19] does Jesus command him, all over again, “Follow Me.” So long ago Peter had promised he would do so; but now Peter is able to do so. Peter has been loved back to life, back into his true identity, his God-calling by this Jesus who will not give up on him, who will refuse to see Peter only as a coward for the rest of his life.

I don’t know what your track record with Jesus may have been until now.

I do know you cannot have let him down as Peter let him down.

I do know we each one of us fights this internal struggle either to define ourselves, provide for ourselves, trust in ourselves—or to trust in God, and in His verdict about us, and to turn over the direction of our lives to Him and quit stressing about it all.

I do know Jesus has not given up on any one of us; He sees in you a dearly beloved child with a purposeful future and a God-ordained way to make a difference in the world.

Whether He has seemed far away or whether you can hear His voice with the gentle piercing clarity of the first rays of the dawn

He loves you.

He keeps coming back for you.

He believes in you.

He has divine work for you to do. Thanks be to God.

John 21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.

But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep...After this Jesus said to him, "Follow me."

