

Text: John 21.14-19

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St Stephen's: Sat & Sun

The Failure and Healing of Love

I wonder if you have noticed how dangerous it is to tell someone that you love them. I find that people these days are reluctant to ever use the phrase. Or use it all the time. Just think of how often you told someone that you loved them – and then that love failed. Becca was not the first woman who heard me say, 'I love you!' What seems more and more frequent today is how someone professes love – often and deeply – and then just disappears. You wonder from the wreckage, 'What was that?' It makes you skeptical and hardened and scarred – and all the more reluctant to risk what love must risk again.

Today's reading from John 21 is about **the failure and healing of love**. It is about a man who professed great things and bailed out, ran out. This is **Peter**, and there is more written about him in the NT than any one else save Jesus, because, I think, he is an awful lot like us.

We find Peter today in **the worst place of life**. It is the place **between failure and forgiveness**, that terrible zone when you know you've messed up badly – but you have not been restored. You are sorry, really sorry, but there is nothing more you can do about it. You are anxious and it is out of your hands. You are waiting to see if you can be forgiven. That's where Peter is in John 21.

But before we go there, I want to step back 3 weeks to the night before Jesus died, during **The Last Supper**

That night Jesus knew his disciples would abandon him, but no one else could see it. He had a special word of warning to Peter (Simon)...

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail..."

Those are pretty sober words, and if Jesus said to you that Satan had asked to sift you from top to bottom, you would be wise to listen up, but Peter thought he was up to the challenge...

he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."

There's no lack of nerve in Peter, no hesitation, no caution, no wavering. Others might falter and fail, but not him.

"Even though they all fall away, I will not."

Luke 22:31-34; Mk 14.29

That's Peter, confident of his ability to give his all, prevail through all, to stand over all. But **Jesus could see something else** in Peter, something Peter couldn't see at all – or wouldn't see at all - **something inside him and outside him that was about to sweep him away.**

Jesus put it right out on the table and warned him again...

Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."

But he said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you."

Mark 14:30–31

Peter is so sure of himself. He thinks Jesus **underestimates** him, maybe even undervalues him. He thinks he **knows himself better** than Jesus knows him.

Jesus says "you will betray me". **Peter says** "I will not – they might but I won't."

Jesus says "tonight... three times..." **Peter says,** "never..."

What is it with us? Why are we so overconfident about our own strength, so blind to our own weaknesses?

Later that night, Jesus has been arrested, the disciples have all fled. It is a long night, and everything seems to unravel. Including Peter. **Three times Peter has been questioned** about whether he is one of Jesus' disciples, twice by a young girl. **Three times he has denied it,** and the

third time he denied it with a curse.

It is early in the morning, now, and **across a courtyard** Jesus is bound and being taken away when a rooster crows, and Luke tells us...

the Lord turned and looked at Peter.

And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times. And he went outside and wept bitterly."

Luke 22:61-62

Jesus' **look sinks to the core of Peter's heart.** No words are needed. Peter knows that Jesus knows. Luke's summary is painful; Peter "*went outside and wept bitterly.*" I think he weeps for Jesus, whom he has betrayed. And he weeps for himself. **This is the breaking of Peter; he has arrived at the end of himself.**

Peter thinks it is all over. But it is not all over. Centuries before, Isaiah wrote:

*A Message from the high and towering God,
who lives in Eternity, whose name is Holy:
"I live in the high and holy places,
but also with the low-spirited, the spirit-crushed,
And what I do is put new spirit in them,
get them up and on their feet again.*

Is 57:15 (The Message)

Peter doesn't know it, but **in the ashes of his greatest failure are the seeds of his healing.**

We **jump forward three weeks**, and in these weeks the world has changed. It was in these weeks that Jesus gave his life for the world. And it was in these weeks that the crucified Jesus rose from the dead.

Peter now knows this, and has been **told by Jesus to go to Galilee** and expect to see him there. Peter waits in Galilee, **astounded beyond belief** at what has happened. **Ashamed beyond words** at his own behavior, his

fear and failure and betrayal. As he waits **he is in that terrible place, the place between failure and forgiveness.**

In Galilee, Peter and his fellow disciples **go out fishing.** One more night of hard work – and again they catch nothing. Then as they are coming in – well, John tells us about it in his own words...

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."

John 21.4,6

They weren't sure who he was, but maybe it was **a familiar sound** in that distant voice. Maybe it was a **memory** of a day on that lake 3 years earlier when they had fished all night and he told them to let down their nets one more time. I suspect they looked for a moment at each other, and then the net was dropped over the edge of the boat.

When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

John 21.6

John says it first, "*It is the Lord!*" Peter **dives** into the water and splashes his way to the shore.

After a failure, too many run from the Lord. If we've failed, we flee. Disappear from worship. We put the Bible away. We stop praying. Drop out of fellowship. We leave our ministry. We give up. It is exactly the worst move we can make.

But Peter **cannot get to Jesus too quickly.** He has learned that **there is more mercy in Christ than there is sin in us.**

After breakfast, **Jesus takes Peter for a walk along the beach.** John follows them (vs 20) at a distance...

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love (agape) me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love (phileo) you."

He said to him, "Then feed my lambs"

John 21:15

Some people think that when Jesus asked this question he might have swept his hand across the beach, littered now with the great catch of fish, the boats and the nets, once the **career ambition** of Peter. Perhaps.

But I think the more likely thrust of his question **dialed back to Peter's insistence that he would not fail Jesus**, no matter who else failed Jesus. "Peter, do you **truly love me** more than these others love me?"

And don't miss that Jesus uses a **large word** for love, 'agape' – this is the lay down your life kind of love.

A broken man can see what he missed, a humbled man will speak with a new caution, a new honesty. Peter says,

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love (phileo) you."

And Peter's word for love is **a smaller word**, 'phileo' – but it's a good word, a good love. He doesn't make the large boast – but a smaller, more honest affirmation.

In that place, on that beach, Peter was **given his mission** in life:

'Feed my lambs.'

If you love me, Jesus says, love my sheep. If you love Jesus, it means loving his people. Those loves always go together.

A lot of people say they love someone, and a short time later they **walk away** or bail out. Love sworn becomes love forsaken. Caught in this anxiety, people will sometimes ask again and again, 'Do you really love

me?’ The question is important because **the heart is complex and deceptive.**

Jesus asks the same question of Peter, not out of anxiety, but out of a determined compassion for his lost friend. Peter has failed, and Jesus is **stepping down to the bottom of Peter’s heart**, one question at a time, **to heal** his heart. So **a second time Jesus asks...** And a second time the response is given...

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Then Jesus **asks a third time**, *"Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"* **Peter is crushed.** Three times, **once for each denial**, and Peter would not have missed the reference. Jesus will **step all the way down to the very bottom of Peter’s heart** to **lance the wound.**

And from the bottom of his heart, Peter finally says, *"Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."*

This is the day that **Peter is restored.** This is **his day of his forgiveness.** Don’t miss that. **This is not a story about the love of Peter. It is a story about the love of Jesus.** It is a story about this savior who knew exactly what lay in the dark corridors of Peter’s heart, and your heart – and who did not hesitate to walk alone to his death – **so that Peter’s heart** – or your heart – **did not have to be the end of Peter’s story** – or your story.

When he had given his life and it was given back again – **he sought Peter out.** The shepherd went after his lost sheep. He came after him, to find him and forgive him and heal him and use him. He still does all of that.

Do you find yourself **in that place** between failure and forgiveness? You sense that he has come for you, and are **on that walk** with him, that journey down into your heart... Let me ask you...

Do you love him? Do you love him? Do you love him?