

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 32: 1-11
SECOND LESSON: John 21:1-19
May 1, 2022

“Undoing the Damage”
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The thing about guilt and failure is that it sticks to us like glue. It’s really hard to shake off. Multiple successes pale in comparison to even one glaring failure. The negative always weighs more than the positive. As I explained to someone this week, it’s a survival mechanism. Negatives get a lot more attention in our psyches because it is **really** important that we pay more attention to the rattlesnake than the pretty flowers. But while shame might be useful in making sure we don’t repeat the same mistakes, it is also toxic. Guilt says that we have done something wrong. Shame says we are wrong in and of ourselves, and shame comes when we know we have failed someone. Peter had failed Jesus. He had denied him three times, just like Jesus said he would. As overjoyed as he had been to see Jesus resurrected, when Jesus was gone again and Peter was left with himself, he was left with his failure. So Peter did what we all do in times like these. He fell back on the familiar, and for Peter that was fishing.

At some point the disciples must have left Jerusalem, because here they are near the Sea of Galilee, their home. Not all of the disciples were there. There were seven in total, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John the sons of Zebedee and two others not named. Peter said, “I’m going out to fish.” Not knowing what else to do they said, “We’ll go with you.” They went back to what they knew. But it was not a profitable night and they caught nothing.

Early in the morning mist a man stood on the shore and called out to them. The NIV says “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” but that’s not what it really says. It really says, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?” This suggests a close family relationship. A stranger would not normally call fishermen “children” and get away with it. It would be an insult to their manhood. And not only did this stranger address them in this familiar way, he told them to throw their net on the right side of the boat for fish and they would find some. As I have noted in an earlier sermon, net fishing depended on the fish not being able to see the net—so it was done at night. Casting a net in daylight made little sense. But for some reason they were curious and unsettled enough to do it, and they caught a huge number of fish.

The disciple whom Jesus loved, most likely John, said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” And Peter, impetuous as ever tied up his clothing around the top half of his body and jumped in the water to wade to shore. They were about two hundred cubits away, which in our measurements would be about 100 yards.

A hundred yards is the length of a football field, and hauling an extremely heavy net full of thrashing fish that distance in the shallows would have been hard work. Had I been one of the other disciples I would not have been happy to see Peter just jump ship. To be fair once they were within reach of shore Peter did haul the nets in all by himself to get some of the fish. We are told that there were 153 large fish.

People have knocked themselves out trying to find a symbolic meaning behind the number 153, but there is no obvious meaning at all. It really takes a lot of grasping at straws. There just might have actually been 153 fish! It was necessary to count the fish in order to divide up the catch among the fishermen.

When they got to dry land the disciples saw a coal fire. Fish was already cooking and there was bread. Would Peter have had a flashback? The only other time a coal fire is mentioned by name in the New Testament is the one Peter was warming himself by when he denied Jesus. Jesus told them to bring some of the fish they had just caught, so Simon Peter did just that after dragging the net ashore. Jesus cooked the fish and they shared a meal. Once again, we find a sense of Jesus being the same Jesus they had known, but also somehow different. Then when they had finished eating Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

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

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

What we don't know in English is that two different words for love in Greek appear in this passage. But Aramaic, the language Jesus would have been speaking, had only one word for love. So why translate with two different words? Was there some kind of subtle communication going on that those who witnessed the exchange latter tried to express in translation?

The first time Jesus asks the question he uses the word *agape*, which means a form of pure beneficent love. Peter answered using the word *philo*, from where we get Philadelphia. It is brotherly love. It's not a weak word. It's a strong word. Think of a band of brothers depending upon each other for survival in war.

The second time Jesus asks the question he again uses the word *agape*, and Peter again responds with *philo*. The third and final time Jesus changes to the word *philo*, and Peter responds with *philo*.

What are we to make of this? No one is entirely sure. Was Peter's confidence in his own ability to love Jesus impacted so much that he could not bring himself to say *agape* but instead opted for the more human *philo*? We don't really know because this is a translation of one word in Aramaic into two in Greek.

Of greater importance is what Jesus was doing in making this threefold request. **He was undoing the damage.** He was replacing each denial with an affirmation. Peter did not realize that at the time. At the time it was painful, but ultimately, it was healing. Peter wasn't fired. He was re-commissioned.

True story: In 1914 Thomas Watson became president of the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company, making electrical punch-card computing systems and other products. Clearly on the forefront of new ways to do business the company changed its name to the International Business Machines Corporation in 1924. That is, IBM. But when the Great Depression hit IBM struggled like everyone else. Watson had managed to maintain IBM's employment levels by increasing inventories. Unfortunately, there was little demand, and excess machinery and parts were filling every corner of the warehouses. Some members of the Board of Directors thought it was time for Watson to go, and put pressure on him to clear out the inventory. Then a very large government bid came up. It was almost a million dollars. It was the perfect answer. Watson desperately needed this deal to go through. *But the salesman failed to close the deal and IBM lost the bid.*

The day after this disaster took place, the sales rep showed up at Mr. Watson's office. He sat down and placed an envelope with his resignation on the CEO's desk. Without looking, Mr. Watson knew what it was. He was expecting it.

"What happened?" he asked.

The sales rep then outlined every step of the deal. He highlighted where mistakes had been made and what he could have done differently. Finally, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Watson, for giving me a chance to explain. I know we needed this deal. I know what it meant to us." Then he rose to leave.

But Tom Watson met him at the door, looked him in the eye and handed the envelope back to him saying, "Why would I accept this when I have just invested one million dollars in your education?"

We all fail. I can remember every pastoral blunder I have made in the past twenty-six years, but I couldn't begin to tell you about any successes. I don't remember them. They don't stand out in the same way. But God has never fired me. God has never said, "That's it! I'm done with you Lisa. You've screwed up for the last time!" God always replaces shame with grace.

The last time Peter had stood by a charcoal fire he had failed miserably three times. This time Jesus brought Peter back to the scene and put him through another three-fold grilling. Peter did not appreciate it at the time, but Jesus walked Peter through the past in order to lead him into a new present. There were regrets and lessons learned, but now it was time for a new beginning. Our failures may mark us, **but in God's plan they never define us.** Amen.

- ¹ Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
- ² Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.
- ³ When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.
- ⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
- ⁷ You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
- ⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.
- ¹¹ Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

John 21:1-19

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”