

John 21:15-22
The Failure
Adam Day
West Valley Presbyterian Church

The sermon series this summer has been called “Encounters with Jesus.” And in this series you’ve talked about a variety of people that met Jesus—skeptics, grieving sisters, an outcast and an insider, among others. The encounter I want to talk about this morning is where Jesus encounters someone who failed. And when we are honest, we too feel like failures in the eyes of God – even those of us who have been Christians for a long time. But Jesus does not distance himself from this man when he fails, and he doesn’t push us away when we fail. So I want us to see how Jesus handles a man who failed him, and what he does with us when we’ve failed him. Jesus addresses our failure and lays out a path for us. There are 2 main points I want us to see from our passage: 1) God can use our failures in our service to him. 2) Those paths of service are not the same for everyone, so we must focus on following Jesus.

Our passage this morning is found at the end of the Gospel of John after Jesus has been crucified, resurrected, and he has appeared to his disciples. This time he appears to his disciples, they make a miraculous catch and are now on the shore with Jesus

God can use our failures in our service to him

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."

To set the context, Peter denied Jesus—three times—on the night he was arrested, the night before his crucifixion (in John 18). . Peter failed Jesus in a major way. On his most important night, Peter says he doesn’t know him. That denial was never resolved. This scene is where Jesus addresses it. You’ll notice what Peter says—he doesn’t try to justify himself, he simply appeals to Jesus’ knowledge—Jesus knows that Peter loves him, even though he failed him. Jesus asks him the question 3 times, and that grieves. Now, there is discussion here about the Greek word for “love” and I don’t have time to discuss it. The main issue here is that Jesus asked Peter 3 times whether he loved him, and Peter understands that Jesus’ 3 questions reflect the 3 times Peter denied Jesus. This is why Peter is grieved over this. We also see that Jesus restores Peter—he tells him “feed my lambs.” What Jesus is doing is entrusting Peter with pastoral care over his people. We see this in the book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit descends on the

disciples Peter stands up and boldly proclaims that salvation is found in Jesus' name and leads the church. As the book of Acts progresses, we see how Peter has taken leadership over the church.

How did Peter become so bold? What led Peter from denying Jesus to leadership? I think the experience of denying Jesus humbled Peter, it took his pride away and he saw that he was not as great as he may have boasted. This taught him to rely on Jesus and it made him an instrument fit in God's service.

Peter's story is encouraging to me because you and I have failed to. We have failed as husbands, fathers, mothers, wives, friends, children. But most importantly we have all failed to follow Jesus as we wish. I would guess that most, if not all of us, don't read God's Word as much as we would wish, or pray as much as we think we should. But beyond those things, we look to other things rather than God. We look for acceptance from other people, we look to our jobs to help us feel significant, we look to our children to make us feel like we are competent parents, we look for money to give us security. We look to other things to fulfill our longings and desires rather than to God. We get angry, we lash out at others when they do not meet our expectations and desires. Deep down I think we know that we have failed God. We sin in the same way we've resolved not to. We can get angry at ourselves and think how foolish we are. We may be tempted to think that God is tired of us – that he is annoyed that we have failed yet again.

But this passage tells us when we've failed and we are grieved over how we have failed God, Jesus does not shun us, or tell us to do a bunch of good things to make us right with him. He approaches us in the midst of our failure—just like he approached Peter, he asked the first question—he approaches us when we feel low, and he invites us back into relationship with him, with a simple question, “do you love me?” And he restores us and lets us know that he uses us not in spite of the fact that we have failed. He uses us *because* we have failed. Failure makes us sharper tools in his hand—it humbles us and teaches us to rely on him. Now this does not mean that we don't have to be repentant or learn from our failures, but it means that if we grieve over our failure and turn to him, he invites us back into relationship with him, and tells us that yes, he can still use us – he hasn't give up on us.

Our Paths of service are not the same for everyone, so we must focus on following Jesus

In our passage, after Jesus restores Peter, he tells him a hard truth, “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!”

Jesus' saying here indicates that Peter will be crucified (stretching his hands out)—v. 19 makes it clear that this is how Peter will die. After predicting Peter's death, Jesus tells Peter to follow him. Jesus has just restored Peter and told him that he would

have the responsibility of leading Jesus' people. Jesus then tells Peter that he is going to die in this (he would glorify God) and suffer in his death. Peter has just heard a hard truth, and so what does he do?

He does what most of us would do—he turns to look at John. Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) 21 When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

Now, the text we just read and in your Bible's it calls this person Peter sees as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” which seems a bit odd. For a lot of reasons, I think this disciple is John (and so do most others). Why does he call himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved?” I don't think this means that Jesus loves John and he doesn't love any of the other disciples. The Bible clearly states that Jesus loved all his disciples and all his followers (Jn. 11 says that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus). I also don't think this means that Jesus loves John *more* than the other disciples. I think what is going on here is that there is a difference in gifts and callings that Jesus has on the lives of his followers – John is special. After all, it tells us that John leaned back against Jesus during the Last Supper—he had a special place, he was physically the closest to Jesus. Jesus even entrusts his mother to John. But what does that mean? It means that some disciples are favored more than others in this life—there is only one John. After all, only one of the disciples can sit closets to Jesus, and this was John.

I think we see John's uniqueness from church history as well. We know that John died as an old man. Most of the other 11 disciples were martyred, Peter was, James was. John was exiled but he also wrote the book of Revelation. He had this vision of how God would bring history to its end. So John was uniquely blessed in this life – he was special, which is why I think he is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

And we know that God is in control of all things, and he bestows his gifts on his followers as he wills. God blesses some Christians more than he does others in this life. God does not distribute his blessings equally in this life.

Jesus tells Peter that he is going to be martyred, he is doing to die because of his faith and suffer. So Peter asks, “what about this man? What about John?” What Jesus has called him to is going to be difficult, he is going to have a hard life and death—and Peter wants to know what Jesus has for John.

What does Jesus say to Peter? Verse 22 “Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Jesus reminds Peter –“look to me, Peter.” You see Peter has a unique path. Peter's path and even his death is—what does it say in v. 19? It says “by what kind of death he was to glorify God.” Peter's death will glorify God, and it will glorify God in a way that John's life won't. John's life will glorify God as well, but in a different way than Peter's will. Sometimes we wish we were like someone else—we were blessed in the way others were. Jesus says that's not your concern—follow me.

A Hard Story:

Some of us have a hard story like Peter. Now, I'm not talking about difficulty that comes about because of bad choices—sometimes we have difficulty in this life because of poor choices we have made. But sometimes we have a hard story, not because of our choices but because that is the path of service that God has laid out for us.

Sometimes you get cancer, not because you were a smoker or an alcoholic, but because this world is broken. Sometimes you lose your job not because you were a poor employee, but because your company is losing money and needs to lay people off. When difficulty comes, you may look around and ask God, what about that person? Why is his life or her life so easy? Why have you chosen to bless them so much? Why are their kids so well behaved, and every week is a battle for me with my kids? Why have you blessed them so much financially and my family struggles with finances? Why does their marriage seem so easy and mine seems so hard? God, why have you given me such a hard road?

Jesus' words to Peter are a challenge to me, but they are also so freeing. Follow me, don't look to them. I have a unique story set out for you—you are the only one who has it. You are the only one who can glorify me in this way.

I want you to know when I say this to you, that I am saying to myself as well. Anna and I moved to Kentucky 2.5 years ago, and it has been a difficult path. I don't have time to tell you all of it, but I had health issues when we first moved out there, as some of you know. God has provided for us, but finances have been tight. We left our church in Southern California and the friends we had there, and have had a tough time with our church experience. I've been passed over for a number of ministry and teaching opportunities, and the same has happened for Anna.

So many times I have talked with Jesus and said, "Why him? I'm more qualified than he is? Why does it seem so easy for them? Our finances are always tight, and it seems like they go out to eat every week? Why have they not had to suffer like we have?"

And as I read this passage, and as I've reflected on it the past few months, see Jesus turning to speak to me—as he did to Peter—and as he does to you. And he says, "Adam, if it is my will to bless them with finances, if it is my will to give that person preaching and teaching opportunities and to pass you over, if it is my will to give you health problems, a hard path of discipleship, what is that to you? You must follow me. You will glorify me in ways that others cannot. Adam, as you draw close to me, my presence and my love will more than compensate for all the things you have lost. I have a story for you, and it will glorify me in a unique way." Jesus says the same thing to you this morning, "don't look to them, I have something unique for you, a story that will honor me, so follow me in whatever path I have laid out for you."

Please don't hear from me this morning that this is easy, because it has not been. There have been many conversations with Jesus, many struggles in this. But I can tell you that he is so good, and he has been so gracious and patient with me. He is with me, and with you in the midst of this difficulty. He does not leave us—a hard road does not mean Jesus isn't with us, it means he is with us in the struggles. He invites us to follow him, to look to him. To remember that we can glorify him whatever our story is.

If you are here this morning, and you don't know Jesus Christ, I want you to know that Jesus invites you. He invites you, as he does to Peter, to lay aside, to turn away from, to repent, of your sins, and to look to him. He died on the cross to forgive you of your sins, and he rose from the grave again so that you can have a relationship with God, and you can be changed, forgiven, and accepted by God. Even as Christians, we bring nothing to God—we approach him on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ. We are loved and accepted by God because of Jesus' work on our behalf. For those of you

who know Jesus here, and you are aware of your failure, Jesus approaches us, he initiates with us in the midst of our failure and brokenness, and asks, "do you love me?" And he restores us to follow him in a unique path that he has laid out for us. A path where we do not need to look to others to compare, but to look to Jesus and glorify him with the story he has given us.