

“Joy and Failure”

Reading: Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19

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On March 23, 1965, astronaut John Young famously smuggled a corned beef sandwich onto Gemini 3, the first manned flight of the Gemini program. Food on spaceflights is notorious for being highly-engineered but less than satisfying, especially in those days, so we can hardly blame him. The problem, though, is that food like a corned beef sandwich can create crumbs that can float around in microgravity and cause electrical problems with the spacecraft, which is the last thing you want when you're hurtling around the earth at 17,000 miles per hour. NASA was not happy about this contraband corned beef sandwich, and in fact later faced questions from Congress about the incident.

John Young's corned beef sandwich is a thoroughly human moment. You have Gus Grissom and John Young, astronauts, some of the most highly trained and skilled humans ever to live, in orbit around the earth in a moment of unimaginable sublimity, testing the Gemini spacecraft, one of the most advanced machines humans have ever built, for the purpose of learning skills and technology required for landing on the surface of the moon, the greatest technological achievement by humans ever...and they're eating a corned beef sandwich that they had to smuggle on board in defiance of their superiors just to get a decent meal. The majestic beauty and terrifying wonder of space is mere inches from them separated by only a thin layer of metal and glass, and they make time for corned beef. That's what we humans do.

In my own life I think of a moment many years ago while backpacking with friends. We were fifty miles and several days from the nearest civilization, hiking across an island in Lake Superior, deep in rugged and breathtakingly beautiful wilderness, when someone broke the wild silence by saying, "What would you do for a Klondike bar?" And for the rest of the week, we could think of not much besides getting back to civilization and getting Klondike bars. That's what we humans so often do. In the midst of life-changing awe, in the face of sublime beauty that gets inside your soul and leaves you never the same, we fall back on something familiar and mundane and controllable. Corned beef and Klondike bars.

For the followers of Jesus it was fishing. They've just been through the traumatic crisis of the crucifixion of Jesus, followed by days of fear that they would be next, followed by the shocking confusion of reports that Jesus was alive again, and then Jesus Himself appears to them. Almost all of them have failed in one way or another during the events of the last few days: Peter's nerve left him, Thomas's faith wavered. Their entire understanding of the cosmos and their place in it has been shaken and upended. They had built their lives on ancient promises from God and thought they understood what those promises meant for their nation, and then they watch as God's fulfillment of those promises offered salvation to the entire world and all nations, not by establishing a new dynasty of kings but by breaking the back of death itself. Maybe they're wondering, again, whether their failures and lack of understanding has excluded them from what God is doing, wondering if they're damaged goods. Life-changing awe, sublime beauty leaving them never the same, cosmos-changing realities making them question their place in the world, and they need to fall back on something familiar and mundane and controllable. Corned beef, Klondike bars, and fishing.

And what does Jesus do? He comes to them, beckons to them, and invites them to share breakfast with Him. Fish and bread miraculously provided, reminding them of earlier days before the crisis, back when they thought they had a better handle on things. Jesus is the union of the awe-inspiring divine and the mundane human, and His presence with them that morning is the same. He gives dignity to their human need for the comfortable and familiar – “Come and have breakfast” – while also confronting them with a reminder of the miraculous world-changing power they’ve witnessed in recent days – “Throw your nets on the other side of the boat and you’ll catch more fish than you can carry.”

And after breakfast Jesus takes a moment to address Peter in particular. Peter had long been representative of the disciples as a whole; he pretty regularly spoke up first or acted first, and he often came across as bold or brash as a result. Almost all of the male followers of Jesus turned tail and ran when Jesus was arrested and crucified, and it was almost exclusively the female followers who stayed by Jesus’ side during the crisis. But Peter, as we’ve noticed several times in the last few weeks, tried to follow Jesus while He was on trial that night, but chickened out when he was confronted. He was asked three times whether he was a follower of Jesus, and each time he denied knowing Jesus. And this was after Jesus had warned him earlier that very night. After years of training and preparation, after Jesus told His disciples as clearly as He could what was going to happen, when the crisis came, Peter wasn’t able to stand up and declare his loyalty to his Lord.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always had sympathy for Peter in this moment. I think of the many, many times in my life when I’ve had an opportunity to claim Jesus by confronting unkind words or by offering words of hope or love to someone who’s hurting, and I chickened out just as surely as Peter did. How many times have I known the good God is calling me to, and I’ve failed? And that’s not even getting into the big stuff, the times I’ve been willfully disobedient. We could go around the room and compare our failures to one another, and some of us I’m sure could win medals, but when it comes down to it we’re all in Peter’s shoes with the same weakness.

How does the world usually treat failure? As something to be ashamed of. Failure is weakness, and since we find our value in being strong and competent, weakness diminishes us in our own eyes and the eyes of others. We tout the achievements of those who succeed, and success is the opposite of failure. If you succeed, we want to be like you and we want you to lead us. If you fail, you need to be humiliated, you need to be punished, you have cost us in time or money or respect, and we demand some sort of restitution to diminish you and build ourselves back up.

But here on this morning on the beach, Jesus – who is the one who has succeeded in a mission to defeat death and sin and reconcile the entire fallen world to God – does not demand restitution from Peter. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus gives Peter three chances to claim Him to His face. And what’s more, Jesus then gives Peter a mission to carry out in the community of God’s people: “Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep.” Where the world looks for restitution for failure, Jesus offers reconciliation, redemption, repentance, inclusion, and the gift of a call to mission among God’s people. It’s not just forgiveness, as powerful as that is: He also includes us among the redeemed and the called.

Or we could tell Paul’s story, and it’s much the same. All our stories are the same when it comes to failure. Big, small, whatever, we’ve all failed. Paul was a leader in the religious elite of

Jerusalem, a respected scholar and a flawless example of an apparently godly person. But in his zeal he ended up missing what God was actually doing, and he was involved in the persecution, imprisonment, and execution of Christians. Talk about someone who had all the preparations and yet missed it when it mattered. And yet in this miraculous moment Jesus appears to him, literally knocking him off his feet, and once again gives him a mission as God's chosen instrument.

When we have a moment of failure, and even in the moments of failure so big that we're left in awe of the seriousness of our failures, Jesus offers us comfort. Not the comfort of patting us on the head and pretending it's all okay, not the comfort of hiding our heads in the sand and denying reality, not the comfort of just something familiar to take your mind off of it for a moment. He comforts us with the power of His community of failures claimed by the triumphant King. He comforts us by giving us a mission to carry out in spite of whatever we've done, to share the news of the risen Christ through our words and our actions of love. He comforts us by showing us that our failures do not shake His confidence in us, because His confidence is never in our own strength or success. His confidence in us comes from His unfailing faithfulness toward us.

Today we are celebrating the community of the church as we receive new members and affirm our membership together. We do this because the stories of Peter and Paul are our stories, too. The church is not merely a place to learn about the Bible and have potlucks. We don't get saved and then join the church and that's pretty much it. The church is a place where we are called together to continually grow deeper together as we go out to seek the lost sheep and feed them with the life of the Spirit. We do this as failures, misfits, imperfect sinners who have been given hope and life and a mission by the risen Jesus Christ our Lord.



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