

7. Jesus' Victory Over Failure

John 21:15-22

Andy Banks. Sunday 28th June 2020. Trinity Baptist Church

Good morning. I'm returning to return to our series exploring the benefits of Jesus' resurrection for us today. I'm conscious that last week's sermon may have been uncomfortable hearing, and may even have left some of us with a continuing sense of guilt at having failed God in the way we have treated his children. Guilt that leads to repentance and change is a *good* thing, so I make no apology. But, once it has done its job, guilt should not be wallowed in. So, if you are *still* there – or if you are feeling guilty for failing God in any other way – then today's sermon is especially for you, as we look at Jesus' victory over *failure*. We start by reading from John 21:15-22 – part of Jesus' third resurrection appearance to his disciples.

[Read John 21:15-22]

15When 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."

16Again 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."

17The 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. 18Very 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." 19Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

20Peter 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?") 21When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

22Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

[Pray]

I love Bill Waterson's cartoon strip, Calvin and Hobbes, primarily because it is so perceptive about life. In one story series, Calvin carelessly breaks his dad's expensive binoculars by throwing them up and trying to catch them. And he dies a thousand deaths before he blurts out to his dad what he has done. The strip that depicts his dad's reaction and the exchange that follows reveals a lot about the dynamic between Calvin and his dad. His dad flies into a rage:

"You broke the binoculars?!"

"Didn't I tell you to be extra, extra careful with them?? Isn't that exactly what I said?! Well?!"

"Those binoculars were brand new! Have you no respect for other people's property?!?"

I'm sure we've all been there at some point or another, and Calvin's response probably sums up how we've all felt:

"I have an idea, Dad. Let's pretend I already feel terrible about it, and that you don't need to rub it in any more."

I think many of us believe that *God* will react in a similar way to Calvin's dad when we mess up and do something wrong. We believe he'll forgive us *eventually*, but he'll leave us in no doubt as to just how guilty we are first! But, perhaps, if we can convince him of how sorry we feel, he might be more sympathetic!

1) Failure must be faced

Peter, of course, had failed Jesus spectacularly. After promising him that he would die with him rather than desert him, when push came to shove, he denied all knowledge of Jesus at the probing questions of a couple of servants. Afterwards, he felt so guilty that he rushed outside and wept bitterly. Since that moment, he'd seen the risen Jesus on his own once and together with the other disciples twice. But it's doubtful anything had been said directly about his failure. So, I wonder what he felt it? Was he trying to brush it under the carpet and pretend to himself that it never happened? Was he trying to convince himself that it was all just water under the bridge? Was he longing to talk it through with Jesus, but fearful of being rebuked, like when he foolishly told Jesus that he must never be crucified?

We don't know. Any more than we know why Jesus didn't restore Peter the first time he met him after his resurrection. Maybe he did, but Peter hadn't believed it. Or maybe Jesus waited until Peter was ready to discuss it. Even at this point, Jesus didn't plunge straight in but slowly and gently enabled Peter to face up to his failure. In the passage immediately preceding the one we read, Jesus enabled Peter to catch a miraculously large haul of fish. Yet, this wasn't the first time that Jesus had performed such a miracle for Peter – it also happened when he first called him to be his disciple. No doubt, Peter recalled that previous catch, and probably also his first reaction to it: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). He felt his guilt then, just as he felt his guilt now. But perhaps he also remembered Jesus' words of comfort then, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people" (Luke 5:10). Could that still be true?

Breakfast came and went before anything more was said on the subject. Time for Peter to reflect, perhaps. And then Jesus asked him a probing question, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" It's unclear exactly how we should hear, "more than these." Was Jesus pointing to the fish and asking if he was more important to Peter than his former job of fishing? Was he asking if he was more important to Peter than the other disciples were? Or was he probing Peter's boast before his crucifixion, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matt 26:33). "Is your love for me really greater than the love these men have for me, Peter?" Actually, all three nuances are important for what was to come. And whichever we think the most likely meaning, it was a painful question.

But what hurt Peter most was that Jesus asked that question three times. Sitting round a fire, like he was when he denied Jesus three times, he could hardly miss the parallel. But Jesus didn't bring this up, like Calvin's dad, just to hammer home the guilt. Rather, he brought it up because Peter had to face up to his failure if his failure was not to hold him back for the rest of his life. That's the first lesson to learn from this incident – failure must be *faced* and owned before we can move on from it.

2) Failure is fleeting;

But the second lesson is that failure is nevertheless *fleeting*. Just as Jesus had reassured Peter after the *first* miraculous catch of fish (“Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people”), so here also he reassured him, after each of Peter’s declarations of love, that he still had work for Peter to do: “Feed my lambs;” “Take care of my sheep;” “Feed my sheep.” You see, God looks at our hearts, not our failures. He’d far rather that we try and fail, than that we fail to try. For the truth is that Jesus has already covered for all our failures to live up to his purposes for us. His perfect offering of himself to God in death was sufficient not just for himself, but on behalf of all humanity; where we failed to offer God the worship he is due, Jesus, as a man, offered that worship for us. And by rising from the dead, he comprehensively overcame all the consequences of human failure.

It’s a bit like the story of the famous pianist Paderewski. A small boy had just started to learn the piano and to encourage him, his mum took him to a Paderewski concert. When they arrived, her attention was distracted, and the boy wandered off sat down at the grand piano that Paderewski was due to play. The curtain lifted to reveal her son playing, one-handed, either Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star or Chopsticks (depending on which version of the story you read). At that moment, the great Paderewski himself entered, whispered to the boy to keep going, and began to fill in the bass part. And then he reached round the boy and added a counter melody with his right hand. The result was beautiful. Jesus’ death and resurrection is like the bass and counter melody that God adds to our imperfect offering. So, failure need not define us. Failure in God’s sight is only fleeting.

3) Forgiveness is formative

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is formative for life. Jesus did not need to spell out that Peter was forgiven, because it was implied in his reinstatement of his calling. Alongside calling him to fish for people, Jesus had also declared of Peter, “on this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). Here, he recommissions Peter to that task of being a pastoring his Church, as he commands him, “Feed my lambs;” “Take care of my sheep;” “Feed my sheep.”

Peter must have thought he had blown his chance of serving Jesus, but nothing was further from the truth. Jesus still wanted him in his service. Of course, Peter had to *believe* that truth, or his past failures would have haunted him always. And believe it he did, for he was able to live out Jesus’ commission to lead his people fearlessly for the rest of his life. There’s an interesting comparison with King David, whose adultery and murder God forgave, but who never seems to have recovered his sense of authority as king after that failure. Perhaps the difference is the evidence of the resurrection for Peter – the solid proof of God’s forgiveness. Who knows?

But we do know that, whereas failure is *fleeting*, forgiveness is *formative* – if we have truly faced up to our failures and repented of them. Jesus covered for all our failures in his death and resurrection. The heart is what matters to God. And Peter revealed his heart in his declaration, “You know that I love you.” Forgiveness transforms our lives into the people God called us to be. Forgiveness releases us back into Christ’s service. That does not guarantee that we will serve in the *same* way as before – they may not be possible or even desirable. But God delights in redeeming failure for good.

4) Focus on following

There is, however, one further condition: that we *focus on following* Christ – in other words that we pay close attention to our personal discipleship. That was the message Jesus twice gave Peter: “Follow me.” The question, “What about him?” was utterly irrelevant. Peter was not to focus on God’s plans for other people (except inasmuch as he was to be a shepherd to them) – he was to pay close attention to his own discipleship and his own call. You see, focussing on other people is fraught with danger: if they succeed, it can make us feel jealous, inadequate, or resentful; if they fail, it can make us judgemental, proud, or blind to our own failures. That’s why Jesus refused to answer Peter’s question, “What about him?” It’s irrelevant. “You must follow me.”

And following would not be easy. Christian service is never easy. My old College Principal was forever reminding us, “No-one said it would be easy!” For Peter, following meant eventual *martyrdom*, and Jesus warned him of that fact. Perhaps that warning was the final test of the sincerity of Peter’s commitment. Or perhaps it simply prepared him so that, when the time came, he would not fail as he had before. But there was one other crucial difference, now: he had met the risen Jesus. He had been forgiven by the risen Jesus. And he had been re-commissioned by the risen Jesus. Nothing else mattered!

So, what about us? The risen Jesus’ call to us is the same as it was to Peter. Firstly, if we have failed – or rather where we have failed – will we face up to our failure and repent of it? Secondly will we accept that failure is fleeting and covered by Jesus’ death and resurrection, and so allow our future to be formed by his forgiveness? And, thirdly, we will focus on following Christ, no matter what it may cost us?

One final point from a collective perspective as a church: are we willing to be a church where failure is not final, where mistakes can be forgiven and where restoration is possible? I hope so, because this is the gospel – even if restoration may not always mean that things go back to exactly how they were before. Will Trinity be a church where it’s ok to try and fail?

[Pray]