

John 21: 1-19
April 10, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

How do we make peace with the big bad things we have done in the past which have hurt others and scarred our own souls—in some cases for decades? Must we simply make our peace with these scars which sometimes come out of nowhere to rattle our souls in a clench of regret?

Sometimes the answer is, “yes.”

But before we resign ourselves to carrying these wounds of guilt and remorse for the rest of our lives, let’s take a look at the healing work Jesus did with Peter after his resurrection.

You will recall that Peter was the unofficial leader of the disciples. It was his confession of faith which prompted Jesus to exclaim “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” It was Peter who had the faith to walk on the water toward Jesus. It was Peter who sought to build booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the mount of Transfiguration. And it was also Peter who vowed that he would never leave Jesus or deny him in his hour of need.

Yet it was Peter who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane and Peter who when confronted with his connection with Jesus denied it three times. It was Peter who felt the sad eyes of Jesus upon him as the cock crowed. It was Peter who wept with shame and remorse.

It is now some days after the resurrection. Interestingly enough, Peter and the other disciples have returned to their old lives as fishermen. On this particular day they have fished all night and caught nothing. At break of day, as they are getting ready to give up they hear a voice which tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. They do not recognize the voice. They are irritated yet they do what the voice asks. As soon as the nets sink beneath the

surface of the water the net is filled to the breaking point with fish. As they struggle to bring the fish to shore the stranger begins to look familiar. It is Jesus! With his usual enthusiasm Peter jumps out of the boat heedless of the depth of the water and makes his way to the shore. The net with all the fish is left of the shoreline as the disciples realize that Jesus has already prepared a meal for them. The atmosphere is relaxed and companionable.

Then Jesus shifts his attention to Peter and the feeling in the group becomes serious. Jesus looks deeply into Peter's eyes and asks in a tone both tender and probing, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Perhaps Jesus' eyes pass over the other disciples. Perhaps, as well, his gaze takes in the fire, the cooked fish and the mass of flopping fish in the net by the shore.

It is a true and therefore uncomfortable moment; for all real truth *is* uncomfortable. *Real* truth raises up both the happy and the sad, the feeling of success and the feeling of failure. To hear Jesus' question immediately elicits what is truly true, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Yet attached to this very real love is all the pain of the memory of failing to live up to that love. Jesus will not lecture Peter on how Peter let him down and left him alone in his moment of greatest need. Indeed, I suspect that Jesus quiet question surfaces the pain much more readily than any lecture or condemnation. To reply, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you (more than all of these) breaks Peter's heart. How could he truly love Jesus when the evidence of his life speaks of betrayal rather than loyalty?

Yet somehow Peter knows that it is love which guides Jesus' question. It is not only love, it is *unconditional love*. Peter begins to sense that Jesus is not asking this question to rub

Peter's face in his failure. Jesus asks the question *for Peter's sake! It is for the healing of Peter's soul.*

Each time Jesus asks his question, Peter answers. Yet this is no mere repetition. Each time Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Peter must feel both the depth of his love and his sense of miserable failure. By the third time the acute sense of joy and sorrow become so sharp that Peter exclaims, "Lord! You know *everything! You know that I love you!*" We can almost hear Peter cry, "Enough! This pain is more than I can bear! I am so sorry! You know I love you!"

It is as if gently but firmly has led Peter to that place where sorrow and love met at Golgotha, to the cross where light and darkness met, faith and despair, love and fear, loyalty and betrayal. He must face the cross.

Yet remember that this is Jesus who was dead and now is alive. This is the Jesus who brought Peter's deep shame to the cross; and not only his but the shame and guilt of the whole world. Peter is being addressed by the One who suffered and died for the overwhelming anguish of the world and all the terrible and hurtful ways we live out that fear and despair. He is being addressed by the One who trusted that God, his heavenly father, would raise him from the dead.

Why was this important for Peter? Why is it important for you and me?

Jesus understood that there is no healing without hope. Why feel the pain of failed love if there is no possibility of mercy and forgiveness? Jesus knew what many psychologists have discovered, but which the church seems to have forgotten: That guilt, shame and remorse, if not addressed and released turn us in upon ourselves. The study of post-traumatic stress reveals that without healing, even small events can trigger the original trauma to be as real as

when it first occurred. Such a pattern leads to withdrawal and an often unhealthy concern with protecting ourselves.

When I was seeking help for a post traumatic crisis related to a still unidentified childhood painful experience, I realized I had lived my whole life protecting myself from being hurt. I could not let people near me for fear I would be hurt. Let me tell you how hard it is to be a pastor when, on the deepest level you are afraid the people will hurt you. On a deep level every interaction became "all about me." It was not until I was led to trust that the person or people who had hurt me could not hurt me anymore and also that the boy who had been traumatized had grown up to be a reasonably healthy adult, that I began a journey of trust which is by no means over.

Jesus spent this deep time with Peter because the stakes were high. Despite his failure to claim his relationship with Jesus and he seek to avoid the consequences of being a disciple, *Peter was still the rock on which Jesus would build his church.* In asking Peter these questions< Jesus was seeking the powerful transformation that only the Gospel can give: Peter will be the rock not *in spite of his failure.* He will be the rock *because of his failure AND his experience of grace.* It is for this reason that after every confession of his broken love, Peter receives a commission: "Feed my Lambs." It is this powerful grace that transformed Peter from a guilty lurking soul to the preacher of Pentecost.

And this is Jesus' desire for you and me. All of us are burdened by the belief that we are so flawed that we have no message to share with the world. We shy away from opportunities to share our faith because, after all, who are we to tell someone else what to believe? We live

that God in Jesus Christ loves us in spite of our failures. We live in fear that someone will discover our secret sins and we will be abandoned.

Yet, as they were then, so they are now. For Jesus the stakes are too high. The world is in such need for hope and healing that Jesus wants to transform what we think are our greatest failures into our powerful witness to his resurrection. There is so little time to dwell in and upon our flawed lives. Jesus wants to turn what we think of as our greatest deficits into our greatest asset—the transformation of sinners into full blown lovers of God in Jesus who now live to bring the nourishing gospel of grace to all of the sheep. Amen.