

Another Chance

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Related Texts: John 21:4-19

There they were, back at the Sea of Galilee. Doubtless they had already had to contend with the ridicule of the villagers. "The adventurers are back. Their grand schemes have brought them full circle." And they themselves were no doubt somewhat puzzled by their return. After all, they had seen the risen Lord. He had called them to high service. Yet day gave way to day, and nothing came of it. And so, they returned to their nets.

Their instinct to do so was a good one. To sit idly by, waiting and moping, would have gotten them nowhere. How much better to get back to their work! Work in and of itself is a gift and a blessing. Those who moan and complain at its prospect of are self-deluded, mimicking some unworthy rote. God himself, Scripture teaches, ordained work as the means by which we contribute to creation and culture. But more to the point, it was something to fill their days.

Peter, of course, still impetuous, was the most eager to get started. "I'm going fishing," he said to the other disciples who were gathered with him on the shore. But the others weren't far behind. "We'll go with you," they replied.

They spent the night, however, unprofitably. They caught nothing at all. As the sun began to rise on the horizon, a voice called out from the shore. "Sons, you have no fish, have you?" "No," came their reply. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." Thinking that from his vantage point a little way up the beach he had seen some evidence of a shoal, they did as he suggested, and suddenly their nets were swamped with a catch so huge they couldn't haul it in. "It's the Lord!" John declared to Peter. Peter had already realized as much, and, leaving the other disciples to contend with the catch, leapt from the boat and swam to the shore. Soon all the disciples were at Jesus' side.

"Let's have breakfast," Jesus said. And suddenly they were all subdued. Jesus hadn't identified himself after all, and no one quite had the nerve to ask if it were really him. And so they breakfasted in awkward silence. It was Jesus who finally spoke.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" It was in essence the question he'd asked him when he first called to him to discipleship at the shores of the same sea. Are you with me still as you were before? Will you again leave everything behind and follow me? Is your love for me yet first and foremost?

With his three denials yet searing his heart and soul, filling him with unbearable shame and regret, he could now express to Jesus how much he hated himself for his actions, how they reflected his weakness not his love. "Yes," he choked out, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs." Jesus said. But then, straight way, came the very same question a second time. "Simon son of John, do you love me? And again Peter assured Jesus, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Tend my sheep," Jesus said. But when the very same question came a third time, Peter grew hurt. He thought that Jesus did not believe him. But then it dawned on him what was really afoot. Jesus was giving him the opportunity to replace his three denials with three affirmations, the opportunity to reverse the past and begin again.

Some moments are so much that they are nearly too much – too much sorrow, too much joy, too much gain, too much loss, too much hope, too much despair, too much beauty, too much ugliness.

This was such a moment. It was a moment of overwhelming relief. Imagine your relief if a loved one you thought to be dead was discovered alive. Imagine your relief if you didn't have to live with the consequences of the worst mistake you'd ever made. Imagine your relief if someone you'd utterly betrayed utterly forgave you. It was relief, finally, that life afforded him something that life doesn't afford much -- a second chance.

He knew then and there that he wouldn't make the same mistakes twice, and he didn't. He and the other apostles, and another untimely born, planted the seeds of the church throughout the Roman Empire. And when Peter's work finally led to a cross, he asked only to be crucified upside down, for he felt himself unworthy to die as did his Lord.

Jesus, friends in Christ, is not reserved for Peter. Yes, *in this world*, we may do things that are irreversible. We may create permanent damage. We may find ourselves wishing that we could turn back the clock. *If only we'd handled things differently. If only we hadn't acted upon bad motives. If only we had made wiser and more godly choices. If only we had realized the upshot of our actions. If only we had known how things would turn out. If only we resolved our problems the right way. If only we had not been so stubborn. If only, if only, if only.* Yes, *in this world*, we may not get a second chance.

But that's not the way it is with Jesus. Such is the way of his mercy. Such is the way of his forgiveness. Such is the way of his faithful and devoted love. In the face of every conceivable way we could deny him, he comes to us as of old and asks only, "Do you love me?" And in the face of our wretched and self-loathing reply that we do, he sets us about his work. And in doing it, we find nothing less than our redemption. He gives us a second chance. This is the good news of Eastertide. Amen.