

The Goal of Confession

John 21:1-19

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Many commentators note that the last chapter of John seems to have been added to a Gospel that already had a great ending. Chapter 20 of John ends like this:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

That would make a great ending to what is, for many people, the favorite of all the Gospels. But it isn't the ending. Instead, we have chapter 21, and I am glad that we do, because it gives us a unique and tender look at the relationship that Jesus had with his disciples. Among other things, it reminds us of the true goal of confession. Not judgment and condemnation, but reconciliation and restoration.

(If it is true that this final chapter was added after some further reflection on John's part—or by his community—then what this story offers was thought to be very important. Maybe people kept asking about the “many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples” that chapter 20 closed with, and this story was one of the most popular. Or maybe, as the church began to grow and leadership needed to become more organized and formal, this story was added to the written record to explain the special place given to Peter, even after his failure when Jesus was arrested.)

This is where I'd like to begin this morning—with Peter. We know from all four Gospels that Peter generally ranked first among the Twelve Disciples. He was often Jesus' “Number One,” the “Main Man,” the Rock upon which the church was to be built. He had a reputation to uphold, not least of which among the other disciples. So we probably can't overestimate how devastating Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus was to Peter himself. Peter made the loudest and most fervent protestations of loyalty-to-the-death when the arrest of Jesus loomed. And then, in the dark of that awful night of arrest, at the point of accusing words as sharp as swords, Peter denied knowing who Jesus was. Not just once, but three times.

How would you have felt if you had been in his shoes? What would it have taken for you to feel like you hadn't blown it for good? Would you, after a failure as dramatic as that, be eager to step back into leadership?

This is exactly why a number of scholars think that when Peter tells the disciples in our text that he is going fishing, what this means is that Peter is not just going fishing, but in fact, Peter *has returned to fishing as his livelihood*. One view is that in spite of the earlier resurrection appearances, Peter is still a failure, at least in his own eyes. Jesus has been raised from the tomb, but Peter still lives in the doghouse. And as for any future ministry, no thank you. *I tried that with the Real McCoy, the Messiah, but when the chips were down, I froze. I blew it. I lied to save my life. There is no future in this ministry for me.* Maybe that's exactly what Peter was thinking. God knows countless others since him have done the same. Including many of us.

But Jesus, thank God, does not leave Peter—nor us—in our doghouses of self-inflicted judgment and condemnation. Jesus seeks out Peter. While Peter is out on the water trying his hand once again at fishing, Jesus is waiting on the shore for him—waiting and preparing a fish-and-bread breakfast. The picture is humorous. Peter, the fisherman, can't catch any fish. Jesus, the carpenter and teacher, already has fish to cook.

As night turned to dawn on the Sea of Galilee that day, Peter must have been at a low point. He had failed as a follower of Jesus, the most important person he had known. Now, trying his hand at his old profession, the nets were all empty after a night of hard work. And to top it off, his buddies were right there; at least, six of them were. He might have wondered what they were thinking of his leadership then. Were they thinking, "Man, Peter, what a loser..."

But then Jesus calls out. *Throw your net on the right side of the boat...* They do and suddenly the net is near bursting with flipping, flapping, silver life that turns the water to foam. And John exclaims: *It is the Lord!*

If nothing else, Peter is consistent. Just as he had done during the storm on the sea, not even a hundred yards of water will delay his rush to his Lord. They all make it to shore along with the net now full with 153 large fish. Some have suggested that this number had a special meaning—that at the time, there were 153 nations in the world, for example, or that added together, the number nine was symbolic of something. For myself, I find the simplest explanation best: fishermen like to know how much they've caught.

This reminds me of a Discovery Channel series I've found fascinating: "America's Deadliest Catch," about Alaskan crab fishermen. Risking death on the Bering Sea, these fishermen drop cages bigger than grown men deep into the frigid waters in frantic five-day harvesting seasons. Sometimes working as 20-foot or bigger waves toss their boat around and threaten to sweep them into the

sea, they haul up their “pots” from the deep while praying for the best. And what do they do? They sort out the females, the wrong species and any crabs smaller than six-and-a-half inches across their backs. And they count each and every keeper crab in each pot. Whether it’s one or a hundred-and-one, each crab is counted. Whether on the Bering Sea in the 21st century, or on the Sea of Galilee in the first, fishermen count their catches.

I would love to know what the breakfast conversation was like that morning long ago when Jesus cooked fish and served bread to his weary friends just back from a night on the water. John only says, *None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.* You don’t get the feeling that there was a lot of small talk or joking around. I get the feeling, if anything, of whispers and silence and men staring but looking away whenever *his gaze* might have turned their way. But if nothing else, Jesus’ invitation for his friends to *Come and have breakfast*, and his handing out the bread and fish to them, must have triggered a flood of feelings and wonder. The memory of both miracles and their last meal with him before his death were rooted in that familiar meal-sharing. It doesn’t surprise me at all that they would want *this* story to be included in the Gospel.

And then Jesus turned to Peter. There are two ways that we commonly use the word “confession.” One way is in the confession of sin. We declare the wrong we have done. But we also speak of Confessions or Affirmations of Faith. We confess what we believe. Here, with Peter, Jesus is actually doing both. But in the way that he goes about this, Jesus demonstrates that amazing grace, that strong yet gentle love that we can now understand is so characteristic of God.

Think about it. Jesus could have said (we might have chosen to say), “Well, Peter, what do you think of being my disciple now?” Or, “Can I count on you to stand up for me now?” Or, and perhaps the most tactful approach I could have thought of, “Peter, what do you think of your performance these last few weeks?” Or maybe, “Peter, is there anything you want to tell me?”

But thank God, Jesus said none of that. And what good news and grace we find in what Jesus actually said to Peter, his hard-headed and now very wounded disciple. *Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?* By “these” Jesus may have been referring to either the other disciples, or to the fishing boat and gear nearby. And by addressing him as Simon, instead of as Peter, perhaps Jesus is choosing not to remind Peter that he should have been the Rock, instead of shifting sand.

Confession can have very different goals. And the goal makes all the difference in whether a confession is good news or bad. Consider, for example, the typical confession scene in a show like *NYPD Blue* or *Law and Order*. The detectives have brought in their prime suspect. The evidence—hard or circumstantial—is brought to bear. Sometimes the police play roles: good cop

and bad cop. Sometimes the truth is stretched in the hope that the suspect will cave in. Sometimes sympathy is feigned. The detectives use every trick in the book to get to a legal confession. But the goal is clear. Conviction. Case closed. Put the perp away. If any compassion or concern is expressed, it may be genuine, but it is usually not. And even if it is, it doesn't matter. Because the goal of *this* kind of confession is to convict and to punish one who has broken the law.

How different is the goal of the confession that Jesus seeks from Peter...and from all of us when we fail, as we all do. The goal of Peter's confession is not conviction or condemnation, but reconciliation and restoration. Reconciliation with Jesus, and restoration to the vital ministry that Jesus has entrusted to Peter, to the disciples and to all of us.

(Discerning the voice of the Spirit: if the message is, you're a lost cause, you're unredeemable; you're trash, be assured, it is not the Spirit of Jesus. God never leaves us in the gutter. God doesn't seek confession to condemn, but to reconcile and to restore.)

And the most important question in this confession is the one Jesus asks Peter: *do you truly love me?*

Three times Jesus asks the question, clearly because it had been three times that Peter had denied him. For a while it was popular to read special meaning into the different words the Gospel uses for "love" and "sheep." The majority of commentators today seem to be shifting away from this to treating the differences as primarily stylistic. But the key points, in any reading, remain the same. The essential confession for discipleship is loving Jesus. Not passing a test, knowing enough, being successful enough in some way or producing results. All of these things may have a time and a place, but at the bottom line the question for Peter, and for us as well is, *Do you love Jesus?*

And for Peter, his *Yes, Lord* leads to a commissioning: *Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep*. The commissioning transforms Peter the fisherman into Peter the Shepherd. The rest, we might say, is history. We know from the rest of the New Testament that Peter does not become perfect. He remains Peter. But his love for Jesus does make him a Rock on which the church is built. And he is faithful to the end, faithful even to death, according to all tradition concerning Peter's life.

In this story at the very end of John's Gospel, God's love is again affirmed in a particularly powerful and tender way. Jesus is victorious over the grave. He is risen, triumphant. But the one who has failed most dramatically is not forgotten. Peter seemingly retires to fishing. But Jesus seeks him out and elicits from him a confession that both reconciles him to Jesus and restores him to ministry in the Kingdom.

Christian confession is not required because God wants to condemn or convict us. Confession of our failures has as its goal our reconciliation with God and our restoration to an active role in God's Kingdom purposes. This is Good News, indeed, because we all fail. We are all found to be lacking. Not good enough in one way or another. But God doesn't toss us aside. One of my all-time favorite Jewish stories also captures this message of the grace of confession:

When the founder of Hasidic Judaism, the great Rabbi Israel Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place, and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

*And it was sufficient. (For God made man because he loves stories.) (Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*)*

Confession strips us of pretense. We are not as able, as good, as righteous, as honest, compassionate, loving or wise as we would like to think that we are. The miracle is, as we are, in God's grace, we are all that we need to be. And the invitation to Peter is extended to us as well. Jesus says, "Follow me."