

Sermon – May 17, 2020
“The Journey”
Crown of Life Lutheran Church
Pastor Dave Schilling

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our resurrected Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Let's pray, "O Lord, speak to each of us wherever Your love finds us this morning, speak to us in our minds, speak to us in our hearts, speak to us by the words of my mouth, and in the thoughts we form. Speak, O Lord, we, your servants, are listening. Amen

Do you think people can really change? Or, are we “hardwired” by our genetics to act or think a certain way? Can we overcome the lessons we learned, or didn't learn, in our early childhood? Those are some big questions, but I have a few examples that suggest that people really can change.

For example, did you know that before Gene Simmons was the lead singer for the '70s rock group KISS, he was a sixth-grade teacher in Harlem? You can decide if he went in the right direction, but that seems to be a significant change to me.

Before she was whipping up French cuisine, Julia Child was an intelligence officer for the CIA.

If there's one thing I've seen in my years following Jesus, it's that He can and does change people. As we move forward in our journey with Jesus, who knows where He might take us or how He might change us?

As we consider the changes He might want to make in us on our journey with Him, we're going to take a broad look at two of the most famous church leaders who encountered Jesus, and how their journey with Him changed everything for them. I pray today you will learn some new and exciting insights for YOUR journey with Jesus.

Let's start by looking at Peter. The nice thing about Peter is that he gives us so much material to use - especially if we want to talk about failure along his journey. However, what you find about Peter's journey is that when he fails, he Fails Forward ... and not backward.

That may be one of the most important lessons we can learn in our journey with Jesus.

Of course, Peter's most famous failure happens just before Jesus' crucifixion. And it's a big failure ... where he gets intimidated by a school-aged servant girl, and denies he ever KNEW Jesus. And he does it not just once, or twice, but THREE times.

Peter's second most well-known failure is probably the one in Matthew 16 where Jesus is talking about His coming crucifixion. Peter pulls Jesus to the side and says, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (verse 22).

Jesus' response is classic. He didn't say, “Well, Peter, we're just going to have to agree to disagree on this one.”

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No, He said, “Get behind me, Satan!” (verse 23). Can you imagine God telling you, “Not only are you wrong, you are a mouthpiece for Satan right now?”

Peter has so many more mistakes for us to learn from. Peter is the one who, when Jesus began to wash the disciples’ feet, refused. And said, “...you shall never wash my feet” (John 13:8).

Peter is the one who was confronted by Paul for backing down from fellowshiping with Gentiles when he was afraid of what the hard-line Jewish Christians would think (Galatians 2:11–21).

If you heard my message on our need for the Church, you’ll remember that Peter is the same person whom Jesus said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). That’s huge.

In some ways, Peter is as big as Abraham - the great father of the Jews. It has always been comforting to me that Jesus entrusted the beginning of His Church to a man who made so many mistakes in his journey with Jesus.

Peter teaches us that if we keep GETTING UP and keep WALKING with Jesus, failure is NEVER final.

In your journey with Jesus, you will make mistakes. You will slip. You will even fail. Peter’s life shows us that one of the most important things you can do after a mistake or a failure is to start on a path to re-engage where God was taking you.

It is OK to catch your breath, or grab your bearings, after a failure. But if you want to keep going with Jesus, you have ALWAYS got to get back in the game.

After his first big failure, you might remember that Peter was having a tough time reengaging. After Jesus’ resurrection Peter was in a strange, awkward place after suffering through all those earlier denials of even knowing Jesus.

Of course, he was thrilled Jesus was alive, but I think he mostly remembered that moment described in Luke 22 where someone had said, “‘Certainly this fellow was with him (meaning Jesus),’ and Peter had replied, ‘Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about! I DON’T know Him.’

And just as Peter was speaking, the rooster crowed ... and Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter.” (verses 59–61).

I am sure Peter was glad Jesus was back, but he still had those eyes piercing his heart. So, we see what Peter does in John 21:3, and I think it’s probably something you and I would think about doing as well to make us feel better. Peter says, “I’m going fishing.” But can’t you just imagine his inner dialogue?

“I was fishing when He first found me. And I told him then that I was just a sinful man ...

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and He still kept calling me.”

“There are ten other guys who can be His fishers of men. I’ll just be a fisher of fish.”

“I’m going to stick with what I know, and what I’m good at.”

On YOUR journey with Jesus, when YOU fail, or when it gets really hard, you’re going to be tempted to go back to the way it was.

There will be something inside of you that calls you to go back to what was comfortable before you took a risk, to go back to what you knew before you tried something new.

Fortunately, Romans 11:29 stands in the way for many of us who may want to go back to the way it was. It says...

“For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” Romans 11:29

Peter wanted to be a fisherman again, but the problem was ... Jesus called him to be a church elder and leader.

I believe Jesus had invested too much into Peter up to that point to just let him go back to fishing. In all those failures, Peter had way too much firsthand experience to go back to the old ways.

So, Peter’s call and gifts are IRREVOCABLE. God can redefine the context, the location, and perhaps the expression. But no matter what happens on your journey, the call never leaves – IT IS IRREVOCABLE. Think about that.

The call on Peter to be the Rock of the Church could never just go away. You are called to minister God’s truth, life, and grace wherever you go as well. You can try to go around and just go fishing, but God still has a call on your life.

Some of you might have thought that when things didn’t work out as you hoped, it was all over.

But each setback was actually a step-up into the future that God has planned for you. The future context of your call may be different. The expression may not be what you expected. But if you keep walking with Jesus, He will bring it out of you.

Peter finds a rebirth, a second chance, and a path to re-engage with God. And it shouldn’t surprise us at all that it starts with Peter taking a short walk with Jesus that we read about in our Gospel lesson from John 21.

During this talk, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Each time Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, I love you.”

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Jesus then brings Peter back to the irrevocable call when Jesus said, “Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep.”

Here’s one possible paraphrase that might help us better understand...

“You still love me, right, Peter?”

“Yes, God.”

“Then get back into what I’ve called you to do.

Peter, you failed me, but you love Me, right?”

“I do, Jesus; You know I do. Even THEN I did.”

“Then embrace the purpose and plan I have for your life.

You love Me, right, Peter?”

“Lord, stop saying that! I love You so much.”

“Peter, you can fish, but you can’t just be a fisherman.

Be the pastor, the shepherd, and the Rock I’ve called you to be.”

The next time we see Peter after that little talk with Jesus, Peter is in a room with the other disciples. He stands up and finds a replacement for Judas. Do you recognize what he’s doing? He’s LEADING the Church.

The very next thing he does is stand up again in a public space, and gives a message where three thousand people come to faith in Jesus.

I wonder. When Peter sat back down and watched the other disciples caring for all those people, do you think Peter thought back to the beginning where Jesus said, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” (Matthew 4:19)

Do you think his mind flashed back to Caesarea Philippi where Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church...” (Matthew 16:18)

I wonder if Peter ever thought, “I’m living the calling, the promise.”

One of my favorite things about our journey with Jesus is that ONLY He can see what we truly are and lead us into what we can truly become.

Peter saw himself as a fisherman. Jesus saw Peter as the Rock for His Church. But despite ALL of Peter’s failures, Peter became what God had in mind.

On your journey with Jesus, if you just keep walking with Him, you will become ALL that God has in mind for you.

Now, let’s see what happened to PAUL on his journey with Jesus. Here, Jesus took the Church’s WORST enemy, and changed him into one of the Church’s GREATEST assets. We read about the beginning of Paul’s journey in our first lesson this morning from Acts 9.

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It’s one thing that Paul went from persecuting, capturing, and killing Christians to becoming a Christian. It’s another thing that he was then transformed into the greatest missionary and proclaimer of the Gospel the world has ever known. I cannot overemphasize how big and important this change is.

Without this transformation in Paul, Rome wouldn’t have known Jesus. Constantine wouldn’t have come to know him. Europe wouldn’t have known Him. And who knows if you and I would know Him today ... if not for Paul?

Paul talks about his journey in 1 Timothy 1...

“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:13–14

Do you see the difference walking with Jesus made for Paul? Before his journey with Jesus, his life was made up with IGNORANCE, UNBELIEF, and of course VIOLENCE.

Then, his journey with Jesus totally changed him into a man of faith, love, and grace.

While Peter sort of blundered along before Jesus, Paul was quite focused and seemingly successful BEFORE encountering Jesus. Paul’s main problem before he met Jesus was that he was just focused on the WRONG things. He was passionate, focused, and completely Sincere. But he was also COMPLETELY wrong.

There is a powerful idea going around today that I suspect TOO MANY Americans believe ... and here it is ...

“As long as you’re sincere on your journey.”

That’s it. It’s not even a complete sentence. But that’s the big idea ... “as long as you are sincere” ... it doesn’t really matter where you go.

It doesn’t matter what you think, or do, as long as you’re sincere. It’s SO close to being true, but it is NOT TRUE.

The reason it’s close is because sincerity is always better than hypocrisy or half-heartedness. Nobody admires someone who is faking it.

Most of us are moved by people who will give themselves completely to their dream, their faith, and their values.

But Paul was completely sincere with his actions before meeting Jesus.

In fact, he was sincere about the MOST IMPORTANT thing we ALL care about - the will of God. But he was WRONG.

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Years after his conversion and his journey with Jesus began, Paul tells his story to an angry crowd in Jerusalem...

“I was ... zealous for God ... I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death ... as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.” Acts 22:3–5

Do you know what Paul calls his work, his learning, and his striving BEFORE His walk with Jesus? In Philippians 3:8, he calls it all “GARBAGE.”

It's not that learning, hard work, or success is bad. It's just that anything of real value is done by God's Spirit in accordance with God's will and His Word.

The bottom line is that Sincerity Isn't Enough.

Being sincere is an important part of the journey, but sincerity alone is not enough. If you are sincerely wrong, you are STILL wrong.

You're just less likely to admit that you're wrong because you're so sincere.

But the journey with Jesus was more powerful than Paul's sincerity. When Paul began walking hand-in-hand with Jesus, everything changed.

Paul moved from a life that was dependent on striving in his own strength to a life that was centered entirely on responding to the Holy Spirit.

He started WALKING by faith, LIVING in grace, and EXPRESSING God's love.

While Peter's journey shows us that failure is never final, the big idea I want to bring to you today from Paul's change is that you have two possible approaches for your life journey (1) You can look to your own strength, or (2) you can respond to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Before his journey with Jesus began, Paul set the agenda for his life, which was the very opposite of what God wanted.

This is so important because your life is precious, your time is short, and each one of you is so skilled and gifted.

How tragic it would be to invest so much time, learn so much, and accomplish so much only to find in the end it was all the wrong things.

Paul was doing all sorts of things FOR God that God NEVER wanted. Unfortunately, don't we do that as well?

How many of us feel that God wants us to “DO BETTER, WALK FASTER, TRY HARDER”?

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If we do, perhaps we are walking down a road God never called us to walk, carrying a burden He never intended for us to carry. There is not a single time in the Bible where God says, “Try harder.”

For all the horrible things the Israelites did, God NEVER said, “Guys, would you just try harder to be good?” But over and over again, God would say, “Turn your heart to Me. Come to Me. Draw near to Me. Repent.”

We feel so much pressure to BE everything, to DO everything, to HAVE everything.

But I don't think joy is ever found in “MORE” ... in fact, it may often be found in “LESS”.

When Jesus was ministering in Israel, there was so much hurt, need, and work to do. But you never see in Jesus a man who is stressed out and overwhelmed. He lived by the Spirit. He did what the Father was doing. No more. No less. And THAT'S enough.

We “gotta do this” and we “gotta get that” and we “gotta be this” in life. Right now, I just want to ask, “Do we really?”

Paul had a new path and agenda that were set by the Spirit of God. To be sure, he worked hard. But he wasn't harried. And it seems like neither he nor Jesus were ever running behind, trying to catch up. They just walked every day by God's Spirit.

Peter and Paul represent two amazing transformations that you and I should think a lot about.

Your Journey

When You and I walk hand-in-hand with Jesus, we can walk with the intensity of Paul or the bumbling of Peter. Either way, we will go forward.

Either way, our journey will produce an AMAZING TRANSFORMATION in us, and AMAZING KINGDOM RESULTS in others, and our journey will be used for God's glory.

I don't know exactly where your journey with Jesus will take you, but I do know if you walk with Him every day, it will go forward to places you could never imagine.

I want to end by challenging you to walk with Jesus every day. Starting tomorrow, let's not have Jesus just be a part of our lives. No, let's make Him the center of our lives, and follow Him anywhere and everywhere He may lead us. Amen