

“Second Chances . . . And a Few More, Too”

John 21: 1-19

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Dane arrived at Fork Union Military Academy to begin fifth grade. He had low self-esteem and was a poor reader due to a learning disability. He was a “C”-“D” student. His future didn’t look very bright.

He went to class with all the fears anyone in his situation would have at the start of a new school year. After class, Dane’s teacher said to him: “Dane, do you really want to learn to read?” “Yes ma’am,” he replied.

Together teacher and student worked and worked. I imagine it was arduous for teacher and student, but they both stuck to it. Dane learned to read well. He became an “A” – “B” student. He went on to have a successful academic and professional future.

Dane shared this story on Friday at Ella Hepler’s funeral, for she was the teacher who Dane said, “turned his life around” by giving him another chance to learn. Ella was a member of this church and she died at age 99 this past week. She taught school for 50 years—30 of them at Fork Union Military Academy.

Ella’s daughter-in-law told me that Dane had been asked to sing at the funeral, but before singing he said he just had to tell those gathered why Mrs. Hepler had been so special to him. She had turned his life around by giving him another chance. He went on to say that at another low

time in his life he had met another friend who had turned his life around and given him another chance. That friend, he said, was Jesus Christ. Dane then sang for those gathered “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.”

The disciple Peter—the one who had denied knowing Jesus not once but three times during those last dreadful, frightening hours of Jesus’ life on earth—had gone back to what he knew best and that was fishing. Peter had failed the test in the school of discipleship—big time. Once adamant that he would go anywhere with and for Jesus, Peter didn’t have the guts to say he knew the man about to be put to death.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic novel The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne commits the sin of adultery and for the rest of her life she must wear a scarlet A on the front of her clothing. She was labeled forever for what she had done.

I think Peter had a “scarlet rooster” on his chest for the world to see. “You will deny me three times before the rooster crows,” Jesus had said. I can imagine Peter—every day of his life—hearing a rooster crow. I can imagine Peter wincing, getting a sick knot in his stomach, and dropping his eyes to the ground.

Some of us know that feeling quite well. There are the reminders in our lives of our failures. We wince, we get the knot in our stomachs, and we drop our eyes to the ground.

One day, not too long after the resurrection but before Jesus ascended into heaven, Jesus showed up in Peter’s life to turn his life around—again. He showed up to give Peter another chance.

Peter and some of the other disciples had fished all night. They caught nothing. Peter must have been thinking: “I can’t even get this right.” “I’m a miserable failure.”

Jesus stood on the beach watching the men fish. He knew they hadn’t caught anything. Children, he said, put the net to the right side of the boat. Even though they didn’t recognize the advice-giver as Jesus, the fishermen decided “why not?” The results were amazing—a full to overflowing net of fish.

Then Peter recognized Jesus. I wonder if Peter winced.

Jesus and Peter got to have a special conversation after breakfast. Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times. The sound of the rooster crowing echoed in his ears. Now Jesus offers him another chance. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. A second chance . . . and a few more, too.

I think of Dane being asked: “Dane, do you want to learn to read?” Saying yes meant not only do I have a desire to learn to read but also that I will do what it takes to learn. I imagine Mrs. Hepler saying: “Then let’s get to work.”

Jesus was clear with Peter. Do you love me? Yes. Then, she said, "Let’s get to work." Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep. Jesus is candid with Peter. It won’t be easy. In fact, you’ll lose your life doing it.

Peter was another success story. Somehow the rooster on his chest faded over time. He winced less often when he heard a rooster crow. He started over and was a faithful

disciple, declaring the gospel and carrying out the ministry of Jesus—even at the cost of his own life. It is amazing what grace can do to a person. It's amazing what another chance can do to a person.

Baptism is perhaps the most profound reminder that Jesus is eager to give us second chances. Baptism reminds us that as Christ died and was raised, we too can die to the old and be raised to a new life. The old is gone, the new has come. And every time we witness and participate in a baptism we remember the friend who encounters us, the friend who gives us another chance, the friend who turns our life around.

But lest we get the impression that these second chances and a few more, too, are opportunities to do our own thing, to start over for our own benefit and our good feelings, we must return to the story of Peter. At the lakeshore that day, Jesus set Peter free. He made it clear that he forgave him. He wiped the slate clean. He set Peter free from a past he could not change. But as Jesus freed Peter **from** his past he set him apart **for** the future—a future of service.

I think it's tempting to just hear the first part. Every time we are given a new chance—every time we are reminded that through Jesus Christ we are forgiven, set free, and that our lives are turned around yet again—we are also called anew by Jesus to “feed the sheep” and “tend the lambs.” Jesus is saying: “Let's get to work.” This work isn't to pay Jesus back for the “second chance.” This work isn't to secure your forgiveness for the next time you need that “third chance.” It is not an insurance policy. No, this

work is part of being a disciple of Jesus. And it will cost us something.

Peter got so excited when he saw Jesus that he put on some clothes and jumped into the sea. The other disciples were initially left with that huge load of fish to take care of. Later, around the charcoal fire (a significant place since one of Peter's denials had been at a charcoal fire), Jesus had said: "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of fish."

I like what one writer has said: "It's not quite enough to merely dive into the waters of discipleship after having a mystical experience or a spiritual high at summer camp," a retreat, immediately following a baptism or confirmation, or during the high of the Easter season. If you love Jesus, you've got to get dressed, wade ashore, roll up your sleeves, go back for the fish—again and again and again—if you want to tend and feed the flock of God.

But sometimes it's hard to accept second chances and a few more, too. Sometimes it's hard to accept the call to feed God's sheep.

I remember preaching my first sermon. It was in my home church of about 30 members. My brothers, who always made fun of me, had a great time making fun of me after that sermon! But I took that in stride—I was used to my brothers.

When I was in college my college church asked that I speak to the congregation about my upcoming mission trip to Japan—a mission they had helped support financially. I spoke for the early service and that went very well. But the second service was a disaster. I made the serious mistake

of singing in the choir that morning. The choir sang in an upstairs loft at the back of the sanctuary. I sang, then ran outside and around to the front of the church and slipped in on the front row. Immediately, I was called forward to speak. Out of breath, I went forward and looked out at the vast congregation—far different from my home congregation. I was so out of breath I could barely speak. The more I tried the worse it got. I appeared very nervous and of course, not being able to breathe makes one nervous! I sat down knowing I had “fallen on my face.” For a long time I said, “I will never speak in front of a church again.”

But God kept prompting me. God kept saying: “Do you love me?” “Of course I love you, God, but I can’t do this.” “Feed my sheep.” “Tend my lambs.” You have another chance. Use it.

Jesus always offers us second chances and a few more, too. Actually, a lot more, too. “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” Today at this baptism—every day we get another opportunity to say, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

But with those new opportunities, Jesus says, “Let’s get to work.” “Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.” It won’t always be easy. But feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep.