



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 5-5-19*

*(Contemporary Worship Service)*

*"Imperfect"*

*John 21:1-19*

My guess is that most of us have something in our past that we aren't real happy about; something that fills us with regret or shame. Maybe it was a dirty hit on the football field that knocked an opposing player out of the game, or maybe it was cheating in a game of golf: miscounting or moving the ball when no one was looking; maybe it was bowing under the pressure at work and doing something we knew was wrong, or cheating on a spouse, or saying something we knew would cut someone else to the quick... and to this day we can still remember the hurt, the pain that filled their face in that moment.

I've got memories like that. I don't like them. The funny thing is every time I start thinking I've worked through my stuff, some new memory comes bubbling back up; comes up from those deep recesses of my mind where they have safely submerged for who knows how long. There doesn't seem to be any end to them – out of nowhere, "Oh gosh, did I really do that, too?" And on they come.

I'm guessing that most of you have those memories because like me you are an imperfect creature. They come with being human. We make mistakes. We do, at times, what we know is wrong and hurtful. And as perfect as someone else might seem, the truth is if we were to scratch beneath the surface of their lives we'd find they've got their own stuff, too – some point of struggle and pain where they join all the rest of us. It is all part of living in this beautiful and broken world.

So the question this morning, isn't whether we've got these memories. The question rather, is what we as Christians are supposed to do with them. And that is where our text and Peter's story come in.

Peter is far and away the best known of Jesus' followers. So many stories about him. His original name was Simon, but early on Jesus changed it to Peter -- "petros" in the Greek which translates as "rock." What did Jesus see in him that he would give him a name like that? Peter was the first to profess Jesus as the

Messiah, but he was the same one, moments later, who Jesus chastised and told to get away from him when Peter dared suggest that Jesus shouldn't suffer or die – “Get behind me, Satan!”

At the last supper, Peter professed his love more stridently, more urgently, than all the other disciples. He was adamant that he would never abandon Jesus even if it were to cost him his own life. Most famously, of course, he was the one who ended up denying Jesus three times that same evening; denied him at the very moment when Jesus needed him the most.

Interestingly, that is the one story about Peter that all four gospels include – his great denial. How many organizations do you know that are so open about their leaders' flaws? The tendency is to do just the opposite. The trend is to burnish their reputation and make them appear even better than they are. Not the Church. Not Peter.

I think Peter himself must have talked about it; made it part of his story, part of his identity in the years that followed. “See what I did? Do you see how far I fell? Just look at what God can do when we let him in!”

I wonder how many of us would openly share something like that? Generally, we just don't want to go there. There is shame in our failures, and the fear of what others might think. Which makes you wonder, what was it that Peter found that gave him so much freedom; what was it that broke the hold that memory once held?

What he found, of course, was Jesus' love; the experience through Christ of God's grace and mercy and forgiveness. One terrible night by a charcoal fire, he turned away from Jesus, denied any connection to him not once or twice but three different times. And then, just a few weeks later, by another charcoal fire, Jesus met him.

He asked whether Peter loved him. Not just once or twice, but three different times. And in that moment Peter realized that Jesus already knew just how much he loved him – knew not just the bad stuff and how he had failed, but knew the good stuff, too – knew how sorry he was; knew how he wished he could go back and relive that moment; knew how much Peter really did care.

“Lord, you know that I love you.” And in that moment Peter understood as never before that Jesus loved him for the whole of who he was: not just the good

parts and the parts he could be proud of, but the broken and imperfect and shame-filled parts, as well.

And that's how Jesus loves us: the good and the bad; the perfect and the imperfect; the beautiful and the ugly – every bit of who we are right here, right now. God doesn't say "change, and then I'll love you." God says, "I love you just as you are." That's the message of the cross. That's the gospel that we proclaim. Unmerited grace. Unconditional love.

Peter didn't have to hide that horrible part of his life because it was there in his brokenness that God met him. God came into his life exactly where God meets us: coming through the cracks, the broken places where we need him most. And it was that grace, and that love, and that experience of God's forgiveness that set Peter free. It is that same grace that can set us free, as well.

Peter was a better apostle precisely because he had failed. He might of intellectually understood the gospel without that failure, but because of it, he knew the gospel not just with his head but with every fiber of his being. He had experienced it for himself, and God then used his wounds to bring healing to others. God touched that place of shame and guilt, so that Peter, in turn, might touch the lives of others.

If you had cancer, would you rather talk with someone who has been there or someone who has never been sick a day of their lives? If you've been struggling with some addiction who do think would be more helpful: someone who knows that struggle firsthand and is now in recovery, or someone who just can't understand why you don't exercise some will power and give it up?

In God's hands, the very thing that shames us can become our greatest strength. Shame undermines. Shame destroys. Shames perpetuates the cycle of everything that destroys our lives. That's not where God wants us to live.

Anywhere else, Peter's failure might have defined the rest of his life. In God's hands, it became instead that crack through which love and grace flowed in. Peter could share his failure because it no longer defined him. He could share it because he had come to know, firsthand, the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

What happened to Peter can happen to us. We don't have to be bound and undermined by shame. Jesus came to set us free. Turn towards him and know his grace. Embrace him as Lord and Savior and let his healing love come in through all

the cracks. Follow him, and so come to know the rich, abundant life he longs to share.