

Full Circle Moments

Some moments in life feel like a circle closing, like Saul, who we know as Paul today, going from Christ-hater, and Christian killer, to becoming the first missionary to the Gentiles. Sometimes the circle feels like something broken coming back around to be healed. It might be a conversation you finally get to have after years of silence. A wound that's finally addressed. A truth that's finally spoken aloud.

This is where Peter is in John 21. He's made a real mess of things. He failed in the very moment he promised Jesus he never would. When Jesus needed Peter the most, Peter denied Him. Three times. Now, Jesus is risen, but Peter is still holding onto shame like a stone in his chest.

In this passage, Jesus brings Peter full circle. Not to shame him, but to restore him. Not just for Peter's sake, but so Peter can be empowered to do the work of justice, mercy, and shepherding the people of God. This is a story of failure, but it's more than that. It's a story of grace that calls us back into the work of healing the world.

Goin' Fishin'

Simon Peter, Thomas (also called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing, (John 21:2-3).

Through the ages, Bible scholars have debated the reason for this fishing expedition. Some suggest that these particular disciples are about to call following Jesus quits, and return to their old lives. Others seem to think the guys just needed to take a break, and go back to doing something they'd enjoyed doing in the past. It sounds simple. But there's deep weariness here. Either way, Peter's going back to what he used to know – before Jesus.

Before the call. Before everything fell apart. It's not just fishing. It's escape. How often do we, after personal failure or public shame, want to go back to something safe – something, somewhere, that doesn't ask hard questions? It's often in those in-between moments – when we're not sure what's next – that Jesus shows up.

"Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, 'Friends, haven't you any fish?' 'No,' they answered, (verses 4-5). They don't know it's Jesus at first. But they answer honestly. "No." Sometimes, the best place for Jesus to meet us is at the end of our own effort – when we've worked all night and come up empty. When all our plans don't pan out. When our strength fails.

Following Christ Brings Abundance

Jesus says, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some," (verse 6). Suddenly, the net is bursting with fish. It's not just about the fish – it's about

the abundance that comes when we follow Christ's direction. "Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, 'It is the Lord,' he wrapped his outer garment around him and jumped into the water," (verse 7). Peter doesn't wait. He's hungry for a second chance. So he leaves the other guys to wrestle with the overflowing net and the boat.

When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn, (verses 9-11).

It's interesting that John includes a specific number here. Cyril of Alexandria said it was symbolic, and represented the Gentile nations, the remnant of Israel, and the Trinity. St. Augustine found that if you added every number between one and seventeen together, it totaled 153. He then proposed that seventeen represented the Ten Commandments, and the seven gifts of the Spirit. Jerome, who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, said there were 153 fish because there were 153 different types of fish in the Sea of Galilee. Therefore, the catch was a sign that the Gospel is for everyone – every kind of person in the world.

However we take it, the number seemed to be an important detail the author wanted to include. I want to focus though, more on the fire. This is only the second fire mentioned in John's Gospel. The first one was in the courtyard of the high priest's house – when Peter denied Jesus. That fire was lit in the dark. This one is lit at dawn. One was surrounded by lies and fear. The other by grace and food.

Come Have Breakfast

A lot can be said about food. When we were doing the kids' and youth programming here, Kendra and I usually coordinated a weekend 30 hour famine retreat with the teens. Those were eye-opening experiences. You don't realize how important food is to living, until it's absent. We get really hungry after thirty hours – but there are people all over the world who go days, even weeks without food.

We have students at the school, who I know have food insecurity. And not just the school I'm at – there are kids all over Shelby County who are living in poverty. We have people – families – right here in Shelby County who don't know when they're going to get their next meal. That's why it's so important for us to continue partnering with Agape and the Alpha Center. If we're following Jesus, we ought to want our neighbors – all of them – to have things as good as we do.

"Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are You?' They knew it was the Lord," (verse 12), John records. Jesus cooks the disciples breakfast. The risen Son of God – the King of Kings – serves. Not in a throne room, but on a beach. Not with fine dishes, but with fire and fish. This is the Jesus of justice – who feeds the hungry, who restores the broken, who serves rather than demands. True justice begins not with a sword, but with bread, fire, and presence.

Do You Love Me?

After they eat, Jesus turns to Peter. He doesn't start with a lecture. He doesn't dish out revenge, or a punishment for his failings. He asks, "Simon son of John, do you love Me more than these?" (verse 15). More than the other disciples. More than all the big fish in the Sea of Galilee. More than fishing. Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves Him – one for each denial.

Peter is hurt by the third question, but he answers as best as he can. "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You," (verse 17). Each time, Jesus responds with a command. "Feed My lambs," (verse 15). "Take care of My sheep," (verse 16). "Feed My sheep," (verse 17).

This isn't just about Peter's personal restoration. It's a commissioning service. Jesus is calling Peter not just back to relationship, but forward – into greater responsibility. This is what grace looks like when it moves toward justice. Restored people become restorers. The one who denied Christ is now sent to protect and feed His people.

"Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go," Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God, (verses 18-19a).

Jesus tells Peter that following Him will lead to suffering. According to Church tradition, Peter was crucified, upside down, in Rome. But Jesus doesn't just tell him how he'll die. He tells him how he'll live – in love, in service, and in truth. This is the cost of real justice – not quick fixes or surface solutions, but lives poured out in compassion and courage. Justice, in Jesus' name, often looks like sacrifice.

Circling Toward Justice

The idea for this sermon, "Circling Toward Justice," comes from a realization that God's work in us often moves in circles – but they're not meaningless loops. They're spirals – like whirlpools – drawing us ever deeper into a more complex relationship with the One who loves us most. Peter returns to the boat, the fire, the water, the question – not to repeat his failure, but to redeem it. I've been there before. Some of you have, too.

Three weeks and twenty-two years ago, I was at a pretty low point in my life. Divorced, back home with parents, trying to raise two little kids, and pinching every penny working overtime trying to make ends meet. I thought of myself as a bum and a failure. I brought Kayleigh and Hunter down here for a Palm Sunday service after pulling a third shift inventory and cleaning job in the Meat Department at Kroger.

I decided I wanted to give them as normal of a life as I could, so thought I'd take them to church. After we got home from worship, I put a Barney tape in the VCR, and fell asleep on the couch. During what ended up being a three hour nap, I talked with Jesus in a dream, for what seemed like just a few minutes. He showed me the nail marks in His hands, and told me "I love you this much." And my life's never been the

same. In that moment, I knew, no matter what happens, I'm loved. I'm forgiven. I'll be alright.

Peter's not just forgiven. He's recommissioned. That's how God works with us. He meets us at our lowest, restores our hearts, and calls us back into the world – which He loves – to feed the hungry, to care for the vulnerable, to live truthfully and courageously.

As humans, we have a warped sense of justice. We tend to think of justice as punishment. "Commit the crime, do the time," sort of thing. But justice, in Scripture, is not about courts and consequences. It's about right relationship. It's about repair. It's about the flourishing of all people under the love of God. Who better to carry out that work than someone who's been forgiven much?

Failure, Flawed People, and Love in Action

If you feel like a failure today, I want you to hear this. If Peter could be restored – he denied Jesus to a servant girl – then you are not beyond grace. You're not disqualified. You may be exactly the kind of person God wants to use – someone who knows they need mercy and who will show mercy to others.

Peter's story reminds us that the Church – the people of God – is not made up of perfect leaders or sinless saints. Jesus is building a just world through flawed people. He's using people just like you, and just like me. And He doesn't just forgive us – He entrusts us today with His sheep. Justice here in Shelby County begins when we start asking: Who are the hungry I can feed? Who are the sheep I can tend? Whose voices are silenced now, and how can I amplify them?

Jesus didn't stop at Peter's words. He turns them into a mission. "If you love Me... feed My sheep." That means, for us, as heirs of Peter and the other disciples, we have to speak up for the marginalized. We must be willing to listen to those who have been silenced. To use of our influence for the good of all. And to create a community where all can thrive. That's what He means when He tells Peter, "Follow Me!" (verse 19b).

Circling Around the Fire Again

Let's end where we began – at the fire. Picture Peter sitting by the flames, the smell of the coals mixing with the smell of grilled fish, and the sea. Jesus breaks bread, and passes the fish. And then He turns and says, "Do you love Me?"

It's a question for Peter. And it's a question for us today. Do you love Jesus? If so, He makes it clear what we must do – feed His sheep, tend His lambs, stand for truth, work for justice, and love without fear.

And know this – in this mission, we do not go alone. The same Jesus who called Peter, calls to me and you. The same Jesus who forgave Peter restores you and me. And the same Jesus who made breakfast by the sea is preparing a table even now – where justice and mercy meet. Where all are welcome.

So circle back. The story's not over. The fire is warm. The fish is on the grill. Jesus is waiting. And the work of justice begins again – around a table, overflowing with love.

Prayer: Gracious God, We come before You like Peter – aware of our shortcomings, humbled by Your mercy, and grateful for Your grace. Thank You for meeting us not with condemnation, but with compassion. Thank You for calling us not just to be healed, but to be healers. Help us to hear Your voice calling across the waters of our lives: “Do you love Me?” And give us the courage to respond – not just in words, but in action. Empower us to feed Your sheep, to tend those in need, to stand for truth, and to walk humbly with You. When justice feels distant, help us to circle back with persistence and hope. When we're weary, feed us at Your fire. And when we are tempted to return to old ways, call us again into the future You are still writing. Make us a people of justice, mercy, and love. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Risen One who still breaks bread by the fire, and still calls the broken to follow Him. Amen.