

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, April 11, 2010 based on John 21:1-19

Feed Store

Peter was in need of redemption. I don't know if he knew he needed it at the time. But he needed redemption.

People have many images of Simon Peter, son of John. Roman Catholics see him as the first pope. So, many imagine him in long robes and clerical garb. Some think of Peter as the head strong follower of Jesus who always spoke before he thought. So they see him as the undisciplined follower. Not many think of Peter standing naked in a fishing boat. But this is the picture of Peter in scripture today.

Peter was a fisherman, and the surprising thing about our scripture today is that after everything he had experienced with Jesus he went back to fishing. Was the resurrection going to mean anything to him?

Peter had followed Jesus from the beginning. He was one of the first disciples called by Jesus. He had seen Jesus' miracles. He had seen the crowds and heard his teachings. He had been at the mountain where Jesus was transformed into his glory and had a conversation with Moses and Elijah. He had seen the empty tomb and experienced the resurrected Jesus.

Yet, in scripture today he went back to fishing. He didn't seem to know what else to do.

His redemption came in the form of a question, "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me more than these?" And 3 times Peter said, "Yes,

Lord, you know that I love you.” And 3 times Jesus forgave him and gave him a job, “Feed and tend my sheep.”

Peter needed redemption because he was feeling broken. 3 times he had denied knowing Jesus on the night of Jesus’ trial. This was the same night that he had declared that he would never deny Jesus and stick with him until the end, but didn’t. Instead, he denied, denied, and denied 3 times that he even knew Jesus.

Because of this, he carried a heavy burden, and not even the resurrection allowed him to imagine he was worthy. He was broken, and needed help. Brokenness is a reality for many of us today.

Rev. Doug Bixby of Salem Covenant Church in Washington, Connecticut writes, *Once while visiting New York City, my wife and I spent some time at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Inside this majestic place there stands an intriguing life-sized marble sculpture of Mary holding the adult Jesus in her arms after the crucifixion. This image of Mary cradling Jesus is called a pieta. While I was standing there looking at this pieta, a well-dressed woman walked confidently into the sanctuary holding a briefcase. She had on a red business suit and looked as if she fit well in the fast paced New York City corporate environment. She looked like someone who had it all together, who could handle just about anything life would throw at her. As she drew close to the statue, however, she put her hand on the edge of Jesus’ clothing and fell to her knees and wept. As she reached out for Jesus’ hand, this woman revealed her brokenness and began to cry profusely. She let go of all she held close and gave herself*

permission to be vulnerable with God no matter what anyone else around her was doing or thinking.

Have there been times that you have felt broken in your life? Brokenness is about being disconnected with others, with God, with ourselves. Brokenness is about being cut off and alone.

Brennan Manning in the *Ragamuffin Gospel* confesses that he became an alcoholic after he became a Christian. People often asked him how that was possible. He responds, "I got battered and bruised by loneliness and failure, because I got discouraged, uncertain, guilt-ridden, and took my eye off of Jesus." He writes, "There is a myth flourishing in the church today that has caused incalculable harm – once converted, fully converted. In other words, once I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, an irreversible, sinless future beckons. Discipleship will be an untarnished success story; life will be an unbroken upward spiral toward holiness."

The story of Peter's life and discipleship in the Bible reveals over and over again that discipleship is anything but an untarnished success story. Peter's experience shows that redemption is a process, not an event, and that significant transformation can take place long after we make the initial decision to follow Jesus. A conversion experience may mark the starting point in our relationship with Jesus, but mini conversion experiences allow us to continue to grow and be transformed over time throughout our spiritual journey.

Peter needed grace that day, and it changed his life. Jesus didn't let him just forget about it or let him off lightly. Jesus made Peter confront

what he did, realize how sorry he was, how broken he was, and then he was forgiven and invited to start again.

This is what God does for us. God knows us. He knows when we fail and knows our brokenness. God could condemn us all, but instead God sent a part of himself into the world to be our sign of redemption. So that when we are ready, we can accept God's forgiveness and hear his call to continue to follow and be Jesus' disciple.

A young woman drove a rented car slowly up a snow covered mountain road in Colorado on a cold Christmas Eve. She was going to see her father, whom she had not seen in twelve years. She had been sixteen when her father and mother divorced after his affair with a woman at work. Neither she nor her mother had ever been able to forgive him. The affair had not lasted and her father had soon given up his corporate job in an Eastern city and moved to Colorado.

He had taken a job with the National Park Service for the summer and hoped he might find something at a Ski Resort in the winter. That was all she knew about his life for all those years. Letters had come regularly, from the same address in a town call Ward, and she had carefully saved each one, unopened except for the first one, in a cookie tin on the back shelf of a large walk in closet in the bedroom of her townhouse.

The last line of that one letter she had read flashed into her mind, as it had so many times before, as she saw the road sign for Ward with an arrow pointing to the right. "I hope you will be able to forgive me someday, Gracie. I love you."

Could she forgive him? Is that why she had come? Even after the long flight and the equally long drive from the airport on unfamiliar mountain roads, she still didn't know.

Grace could see the lights of the little town, shimmering below her, shiny and yellow against the snow, like the gold that had once been mined from the mountain. She turned off the main highway and shifted into low gear. The road down to the village was steep and narrow and snow covered. Sand had been spread on the curve but she still had to go slow. She wondered in which of the thirty or forty houses and old miner shacks she could find her father. She pulled up in front of the general store. The porch light was on and the door was open. A young woman about her age, dressed in bib overalls with braided hair hanging down to her waist, was crocheting behind the counter near a small wood burning stove. The woman smiled at Grace and said, "Good evening. What can I do for you?"

"I am looking for my father," Grace said. The plaintive tone of her own voice surprised her. She told the woman her father's name and immediately saw a knowing look of recognition. "Old, Jim – he comes in here all the time. You must be Grace. He told me about you."

It seemed strange to hear her father called old. Grace remembered him as middle age. Of course, he would be older now, in his late sixties. It pleased Grace to know that he had spoken of her.

"Almost everybody is up at the church," the woman said. "I saw your dad go up about a half hour ago. A retired preacher comes up every Christmas Eve. It is about the only time they have services here. You can leave your car out front. It is easier to walk from here."

Grace slowly made her way over the footbridge spanning the ice covered stream that wound through the center of town. She could see the snow covered church about two hundred yards up the mountain. On top of the steeple there were green, blue and red Christmas lights flashing in the form of a star. They appeared to be attached to the cross. Her hands trembled as she opened the door of the church. Would her father be glad to see her after all these years? Would he recognize her?

She spotted him sitting by himself in one of the back pews. "Old Jim." The woman at the store was right. His hair was thin and completely grey. He was much heavier now. He looked tired, and the thought pained her, very much alone.

The congregation stood up to sing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." The words of the familiar carol rang in her ear as she slipped in the pew behind her father. "Glory to the new born King, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."

She squeezed her father's hand and a smile came over his face in the same instance he turned to see her. "Grace," he said, "I am so glad to see you."

"Daddy" was all she was able to say.

When the preacher gave the invitation to come forward for Christmas communion, Grace and her father walked up the aisle hand in hand.

When I first moved to Mokena 15 years ago, I rented a house for 6 months while I looked for a place to live. The house was 3 houses from the train station. Next to the train station, there was still an old fashion feed store next to the railroad tracks. You could go inside and buy all

kinds of feed for all kinds of animals. They still had the tubs full of rabbit food and chicken food and bird food, and you could scoop out as much or as little as you wanted. They also had bags of food for livestock and dogs and cats and all kinds of critters. It was a place where all kinds of creatures could be fed.

I have always thought of the church as that feed store. The church is a place where we find the food we need to have life and new life. Sometimes, we need the food of inspiration. Sometimes, we need the food of knowledge. Sometimes, we need the food of fellowship. Sometimes we need the food of service. And many times we need the food of forgiveness so that we are whole again instead of broken. Jesus forgave Peter that day on the lake shore. Then he fed him and gave him a job of what to do. Jesus is still doing that for us. That's the reality of being a disciple. Discipleship is about being forgiven, being fed, and following. Amen.