

Jumping in Over Your Head Sunday, 8/2/20

If you had to name a favorite apostle of Jesus, who would it be? Many say Peter, because his flaws are so obvious that it's not very difficult for us to see ourselves in him. Peter is also a hopeful apostle to identify with because we know that despite his flaws and failures, Jesus constantly gave him second chances, and one whopper of a second chance in particular that we'll hear about in a little while. If you recognize yourself in any of Peter's outrageous statements or actions, take heart. Jesus has a second chance for you as well.

Let's start by considering Peter's almost successful attempt at walking on water. Peter is almost universally lifted up as an example of courageous faith, and it's not unusual for pastors to proclaim that if the church only had a little more faith, we could walk on water! It's true that Peter was courageously obedient to Jesus. Jesus said, "Come,"¹ and over the side of the boat came Peter. I have to say that I'm not so sure I would have climbed out of the boat so quickly. How about you?

But since we're being honest about Peter's flaws today, let's look at the bigger picture and ask just how full of faith Peter actually was. The disciples are described in this passage from Matthew as being "terrified," and it was apparently easier for them to believe that Jesus was a ghost than that Jesus could possibly be walking on water. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have been terrified right there along with them, I'm just saying that Matthew doesn't paint a picture of a boat full of disciples bursting with faith.

But next is where Peter's true colors really came out, I think. Notice what Jesus asked Peter and the other disciples to do: "'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'Take courage.'" Instead, rather than showing courageous faith, Peter lead with doubt, saying "Lord, if it's really you..." Really, Peter? IF it's really Jesus? Strike one.

Peter unleashed another wild swing of faith by suggesting the whole walking on water stunt, very much putting God to the test, something explicitly forbidden in Deuteronomy 6:16, an Old Testament commandment that incidentally also came about as the result of two sinful tests of God involving water. Strike two!

Peter completed his trifecta of failure, strike three, when he allowed the sight of the

¹ Matthew 14:29. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

waves to feed his fear, and the little courageous faith that allowed him to get out of the boat fled and he began to sink. Jesus hoisted him out of the water, shook his head, and said “You have so little faith...Why did you doubt me?”

I used to assume that Jesus was referring to Peter’s failure to stay afloat when he said, “Why did you doubt me?,” but now I suspect that Jesus might have been referring more generally to the entire episode that started with Peter and the others quaking with fear in the boat. If Peter had done as Jesus had commanded (i.e., take courage) there really wouldn’t have been any need for him to get wet. The whole fiasco was of Peter’s own making, a failure of his trust in Jesus and a misguided attempt to put God to the test, putting himself to the test instead.

Do you recognize yourself in any of those failures? Have you failed to be courageous when God asked you to be? Have you insisted on testing God before obeying God’s Word? Have you let your fear drive away what little faith you have, sending you under the waves of life? If that’s you, then take heart. Jesus did chastise Peter, but he also fished him out of the water and forgave him.

Peter’s most famous failure was his denial of Christ after the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. There’s no need for me to even ask you if you’ve failed in this way, because we all have. Mind you, I’m not saying that we’ve all said those same words, “I don’t even know him!”² What I am saying is that we’ve all denied Christ when we’ve willfully turned away from God’s law of love, neglecting our love relationship with God and choosing to serve ourselves instead of loving our neighbors. In Peter’s case, he did so in a spectacular, public fashion- not once or twice, but three times consecutively. Strikes one, two, and three. Have you been there? Have you failed to acknowledge Jesus, willfully, and repeatedly, knowing that even as you’re doing it that there will be consequences to your faith that you can only begin to imagine? Peter struck out again when he denied Christ, but this time, Jesus wasn’t there to fish him out of his betrayal and dismiss him with a gentle chastisement. This time, Peter entered a long, dark tunnel of despair.

² Luke 22:57. Ibid.

One of the most difficult things we can do is to be hopeful in faith, despite what we see with our eyes and despite the skepticism that rises up in our heads and in our hearts. After the disciples deserted Jesus at Gethsemane; after they saw Peter, their “rock,” deny Jesus; after they saw Jesus crucified and buried in a tomb, their faith batteries were probably running low. Peter was probably so dejected that he might have said something like, “I guess I finally screwed up one too many times. I’m going back to the one thing I know how to do. I’m going fishing.” And so he did, as we read in Chapter 21 of the Gospel of John.

The others went along with Peter, but even a retreat to what they thought they knew how to do was marked by failure, and they passed the evening without catching any fish. Imagine you’re one of those disciples and you’re witnessing another sunrise that promises another day of dejection and failure. Can you feel it? Have you been there? Is that the way you felt when you opened your eyes this morning? Is that the way you feel right now? Hang in there, because hope is here.

It’s astonishing to me that the disciples, not knowing who Jesus was as he stood far away on the shore, nevertheless did as he told them. They cast their net on the other side of the boat. It’s almost as if they said to themselves, “We’ve tried everything else, what do we have to lose?”

It’s only when they miraculously filled their nets with fish that Peter suddenly recognized Jesus, newly risen from the tomb. Imagine what Peter must have been feeling at seeing his Lord alive and well. And despite all his shame regarding his denial, his first instinct was to rush to the savior whom he loved.

I love this picture of Peter jumping into the water when he realized that it was Jesus standing on the shore. It’s so clear that he’s about to do a belly flop, right? Would you be willing to do a belly flop for Jesus? Would you be willing to set aside your shame for the ways you’ve failed to live as Christ would have you do, dropping all pretense and excuses and simply rushing into the embrace of the savior who loves you, the savior who’s so very eager to offer you a second chance?

After a breakfast of fish with Jesus on the beach, the real action of the story begins. I'm reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 21, starting in verse 15 in The New Living Translation.

{Read John 21:15-22 NLT}

Even before Jesus asked the question of Peter, "Do you love me?," the answer was clear. Peter had learned the hard lesson that we have to learn over and over again: It's not about us, what we think we can or can't do, what we think we've succeeded at or failed at, it's about the one who calls us. Jesus wanted to underscore that fact before restoring and commissioning Peter for to lead the church. Jesus knew how many ways we could go sideways in our best attempts at living out our faith. And so Jesus took Peter aside and had what is one of the most famous leadership discipling conversations in the Bible.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't ask Peter if he loved being a disciple? He didn't ask Peter if he loved the work of ministry. He didn't ask Peter if he loved the other disciples. He didn't ask Peter if he loved his synagogue or if he tithed. He didn't ask Peter if he loved God's sheep. And he didn't even ask Peter if he was sorry for denying him. Instead, Jesus simply asked Peter if he loved him, not once but three times.

Peter's appointment to be a shepherd of God's sheep required training in a new heart, a new way of thinking, and a new way of doing things. It required a recapturing of Peter's first love, his love for Jesus, and a reconciliation with God for past wrongs. In Peter's case, his most glaring wrong was his denial of Jesus- not once, but three times. How about you? What's preventing you from reclaiming your first love of Jesus? Is there a past wrong that you need to confess before you reconcile with Jesus?

There's no point in letting that kind of burden stand in the way of the joy of being in the presence of the Good Shepherd, not when Jesus is so eagerly waiting for you on the beach, wanting nothing more than for you to draw close, accept his forgiveness, be healed, and move forward again as His disciple. In just a few moments, we'll commune with God over a shared meal- not of fish, but of bread and juice. Don't let this opportunity pass to bare your soul to the one who can make you whole again.

Please take some time now to reflect on your need for God's forgiveness. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



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