

The year is 1912. The location is Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts. And on Wednesday, October 16, the event is the final game in the World Series of Major League Baseball between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Giants. And yes, the Giants were in New York until 1957, I don't have my teams confused.

Due to an unusual tie of Game 2, the series has stretched to an 8<sup>th</sup> game. And the tension couldn't be higher. Devore of the Giants scores a run in the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, and the Giants hold onto their lead until the 7<sup>th</sup> inning when Boston scores a run. Tied at one run each after the 9<sup>th</sup>, the game goes into extra innings.

In the top of the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Giant's Murray doubles with one out and scores on a base hit by Merkle. So at the bottom of the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Giants are up by one, and are just three outs away from winning the World Series.

And then Clyde Engle, pinch-hitting for Boston's pitcher, leads off with an easy fly ball to Fred Snodgrass in center field. The ball hits Snodgrass' glove...and bounces out. Engle reaches second base and on the next hit rounds to third. A series of walks, a dropped foul ball, and Engle scores, tying the game, with the winning run now on third base. Larry Gardner flies out to right field but it's deep enough for the runner to tag up on third and then bolt for home. The Red Sox win the 1912 World Series.

There were a number of errors committed by the Giants in that final inning, but Fred Snodgrass' went down in history. Called the "\$30,000 muff," a reference to the difference in the winning and losing shares, Snodgrass would forever be known for dropping the ball at the beginning of that inning, shifting the momentum and letting the Red Sox win the game. It would become one of the most famous errors in baseball history.

Snodgrass went on to do remarkable things after retiring from the Majors. He became a successful banker, a rancher, a popular city councilman, and eventually became the mayor of Oxnard in Ventura County, California. And yet, when Fred Snodgrass died on April 5, 1974, the title of his obituary in the New York Times read, “Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly.”

The New Yorker observed a few days later that for all his accomplishments, it was his failure that would be remembered. “How lucky we are,” writes the author, “those of us who go to the grave without having played a professional sport! The “Times” will be gentle with us, and a miscalculation that occupied less than a second on a sunny fall day when we were 24 will not be made the means by which we win a place in history.”

What the Time’s obituary illustrates is that we love failures. Stories of people – especially celebrities – who crash and burn captivate us. Think of Tiger Woods and his affair, or Lance Armstrong after it was discovered he’d been using performance-enhancing drugs.

And it isn’t just sports or movie stars. In the church, we have a sort of perverse way of talking about celebrity pastors who end up falling from grace. Rob Bell’s exile to California after “Love Wins” came out. Mark Driscoll’s demise after it was found he rigged his own book sales. And most recently the news of Bruxy Cavey, charged with multiple counts of sexual assault. When these stories come out we speak about them with lament and grief for the victims...but also, I think, with a sense of fascination, and maybe even glee, at the downfall of the offender.

Maybe we have some sort of perverse satisfaction in seeing people who seemed to have it all mess up and receive their comeuppance. Maybe we like knowing that people who seem to live in this other world are still human. Maybe we feel better about ourselves when we

read such stories of downfall. Whatever it is, these people will all be known now for their failures. Like Fred Snodgrass, their obituaries will likely be a stark reminder of their sins and failures.

I wonder if this was something Peter was afraid of. Because while all the disciples but John had fallen away from Jesus during that dark Friday at the cross, Peter had flat out denied him. Told people three different times that he didn't know Jesus, had never been associated with the man. Peter had failed.

In the first half of this chapter, we see Peter exuberantly jumping out of the boat to get to Jesus...rather oddly putting on *more* clothes before he gets in the water. And with all this previous action we might miss the drama of what comes next.

It's now the early dawn, and Peter is once more sitting around a firepit, just like he did a few weeks ago when the servant girl asked him if he knew Jesus. The scene is eerily familiar for Peter. Uncomfortably familiar. And Jesus – well Jesus knows about Peter's denial. He knew about it before it even happened.

So there they sit, eating bread and fish, listening to the lapping of the sea against the rocky sand, Jesus in contemplative silence, Peter in an awkward, unsure silence. Did the other disciples sense this discomfort?

Then, finally, after all that remains of the fish is a pile of charred bones, I imagine Jesus getting to his feet, motioning for Peter to follow. They walk a little way along the shore, and then stand, gazing out to sea. Jesus breaks the silence first. He gestures back to the little huddle of disciples.

“Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”

Peter (also called Simon) looks at Jesus. “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

Jesus asks him another time, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”

And again, Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Take care of my sheep.”

And a *third* time Jesus says to Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Now, by this point, Peter is a little annoyed. Was he not clear the first two times?

But we know what Jesus is doing. And maybe Peter has sensed it too. Three times Peter had denied Jesus. And now, three times, Peter has declared that he loves Jesus. Jesus is absolving Peter, symbolically wiping away the past with a new declaration of love.

In these three questions and three answers, Jesus is restoring Peter to the community. Peter is to no longer be identified as “the one who denied Jesus” but as “the one who loves Jesus.”

But Jesus doesn’t just receive Peter’s answer and leave it there. After each response is an imperative, a command: “Feed my sheep.”

One of my seminary professors used to teach at a college, and he told us that every year, he’d have a couple seniors come to his office the week of graduation and say, “Professor, I’ve got to get something off my chest. In your biblical theology class sophomore year, I cheated pretty badly on your final exam.” Wanting to graduate with a clear conscience, they’d ask him for forgiveness, to which he would reply, “Well...I can offer you a retake...” The student would always look a bit stunned, and then after some more groveling, my professor would inevitably offer forgiveness.

But the point, I think, is well made. Repentance means making a change, doing things differently. The word “repentance” means “to feel such regret for one’s crimes and sins as produces amendment of life.” It’s different than “regret.” It isn’t just to feel sorry that you did something, or sorry that you got caught doing something, but to turn away from that thing and live differently. To take the test again, but honestly this time.

One of the wonderful things about the reformed accent of Christianity is its emphasis on the sovereignty of God and on grace. We don’t earn our way into God’s favor. We aren’t “justified by works.” But in our clamor to emphasize this point, we run the risk of making grace cheap. The pastor David Lose writes, “I wonder if we haven’t developed such an allergic reaction to “justification by works” that we dismiss the idea of God expecting us to do *anything*. Is being justified by grace through faith really an excuse to do nothing; to be unchanged, unaffected by the gospel; to live as if Christ’s life, death, and resurrection makes no difference?”

He goes on to say, “to borrow language from the Reformation, justification and vocation are two sides of the same coin. Forgiveness always leads to mission, restoration to purpose, and inclusion to calling.”

Jesus forgives Peter, and reinstates Peter into the community, but then he also commissions Peter. He gives Peter a mission, a responsibility, a task. Peter is part of the body of Christ, and therefore he has a calling. “Feed my lambs. Help me shepherd this flock. Even if that means dying for it. Follow me.”

For after the third time Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me,” he tells Peter what loving Jesus will mean. “I tell you the truth, 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.” We know now that Peter would die by crucifixion, with early church historians attesting that he requested to be crucified upside down for he considered himself unworthy to die in the manner of Christ.

But Peter doesn't know this yet. He only knows that following Jesus might mean death. Following Jesus means going all in. And Peter does. The testimony of Peter's life is one of faithfulness and commitment. But Peter doesn't become a saint overnight. In his commissioning of Peter, Jesus doesn't place the disciple on the pedestal that we, as the church, have. Sure, Peter is the rock on which Christ's church is built. Definitely, Peter is an incredibly important person in the early church.

But after receiving Christ's forgiveness and mission, Peter is by no means perfect. Peter will go on to be a fairly contrary kind of person. He'll duke it out for years with Paul over the Gentile question, arguing vehemently that Jews and Jews alone were to be part of the covenant. In fact, just seconds after Jesus says, “Follow me,” Peter messes up.

He looks over at John, and yes – granted – it's a little pompous to refer to yourself in the book you're writing as “the one whom Jesus loved.” But that's neither here nor there. Peter looks at John and says, “What about him?” As in, “What kind of death will he die? What will it mean for him to follow you? What will his discipleship look like? How important is he?” Peter is given a mission by Jesus and no sooner does he receive this mission than he dives headlong into the miry pit of prideful comparison.

Which is a danger we all are tempted by, right? We compare ourselves to each other *constantly*.

“Oh, look at how well behaved her kids are.”

“Wow, he eats a plant-based diet and runs every day. I should be doing that.”

“Look at all the books on their shelves about Jesus. They must be really holy.”

“Really? You read the Bible three times a day, not just twice?”

“Oh, look at what that church just posted on Facebook. It looks like they’re doing really cool ministry things over there...”

“That church has a pallet wall in their sanctuary. I don’t know how we’re going to compete with a pallet wall...”

We basically spend our entire day comparing ourselves to other people. We compare appearances, lifestyles, walks with God. And more often than not, this results in us feeling pretty miserable about ourselves.

And all of this, I think, fuels that sort of sick glee we feel when someone fails. Because it wasn’t us. Someone else’s fall from grace means we’ve just gained a rung on the ladder of success.

But Jesus will have none of that. Because that isn’t grace. “What is that to you?” he says to Peter. “Mind your own business. Be faithful to me without worrying about what anyone else is doing. It doesn’t matter what others think – it matters what I think. And I have told you that you are forgiven, and you are to follow me. I have told you to feed my lambs, to take care of my sheep.”

And if Jesus, the Shepherd, offers forgiveness and reconciliation, then the way we feed his lambs is to do the same. Not from a place of superiority. Not by leaning down from our pedestal and groveling in the slums of sinners. We know that our own commissioning, our own vocation as tenders of the flock, only comes because we, too, have received the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, because we, though

undeserving, have been invited into the community. D.T. Niles once famously said, “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread.” Christianity is one sinner telling other sinners, “Come and receive forgiveness! Come and live into your new identity in Christ. Come and see how Jesus wipes away your failures and your sins, all with the simple question, “Do you love me?”

For me this has never been better modelled than at the Calvin Prison Initiative at Handlon Prison in Ionia, Michigan. A group of men, defined in the eyes of the rest of the world by their worst failure – murder, rape, assault – given a second chance and brought back into a community of believers through a four-year bachelor’s degree offered by Calvin University and Calvin seminary. They’ll tell you now, “I am a student! I am a brother in Christ! I am a child of God!”

And they take the calling to live into the forgiveness they have received seriously. Calvin’s program is based on the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, where, after a Baptist seminary started offering classes, violence in the prison dropped by 80%. Angola now has 30 congregations all led by inmate pastors, which offer more than 400 worship services and Bible studies a month. And already at Handlon, the warden will tell you he’s seen a drop in violence, and more and more inmates are asking to be part of a program like CPI.

And those ripples extend out of the prison as well. Two CPI students, Jeremiah Brooks and Ryan Colter, began a gardening project at Handlon. All the food they harvest at the end of the summer goes to Calvin University’s Dining Services to be used in feeding students. And in turn, the money Calvin would have spent on that food is donated to women’s shelters in Grand Rapids. This is a literal, and metaphorical, feeding of the sheep.



This is the power of resurrection. This is the good news, that by asking “Do you love me?” Jesus gives the opportunity *to be* loved. And this is the invitation to live into the love we have received, and to welcome others into that community, into that relationship with one another and with God.

“Do you love me?”

“Feed my sheep.”

Would you pray with me?

O Christ, the Good Shepherd,  
Thank you that in you we find forgiveness.  
Thank you that you do not give up on us  
in our moments of weakness and betrayal,  
but call us back to you and restore us,  
to ourselves, to our community, to you.  
May we live out of our forgiveness,  
extending grace to those around us,  
bringing others into the love we have experienced.  
May we heed your call,  
the call of your kingdom.  
In your name, and in the power of your Spirit,  
we pray all these things.  
Amen.