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## **After the Great Blindness** **John 21: 4-17**

I was eleven years old, coaching third base for my little league baseball team. It was the bottom of the last inning, two outs; we were down a run, but had a runner on third. I told my teammate, "As soon as the bat hits the ball, you go. You never know what might happen." Sure enough, the batter popped up behind second, and my runner took off like a rocket. But when the second baseman caught the fly, he quickly turned and threw over to the third baseman, who stepped on the base, even as I was wondering, "Why did he do that?" I suddenly realized that I had committed the cardinal sin of a third base coach: I had miscounted the number of outs and coached my team into a game-ending double play. That was what, forty years ago? Yet even now I remember keenly wanting to climb into a hole and hide.

One naturally assumes that a sermon called "After the Great Blindness," would be bright and happy. But in fact, after our great blindness has been revealed, we don't suddenly feel illumined, or suddenly strong, suddenly wise, suddenly courageous or suddenly empowered. We feel foolish, obtuse, angry, embarrassed – humiliated. We want to crawl in a hole and hide.

Young people, if your parents ask you what the sermon was about today, you can tell them: it was about shame. *It was about what you do after you have messed up.* That's why we find Peter in a fishing boat and not in Jerusalem preaching the Word, not in the temple debating with the Pharisees, not in Galilee joyously proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. We find him back doing what he did *before* Jesus called him to ministry. Peter had bravely proclaimed that though the rest of Jesus' disciples might forsake him, Peter never would. Then he had denied his Lord repeatedly, publicly. Naturally, he would want to distance himself as far as possible from the venue – and the calling – that revealed great flaws in his character. Who among us has not felt the same temptation? After we have failed a relationship, fumbled an assignment, forsaken a responsibility, made a woeful miscalculation, undermined a friendship, or wasted our time in some vain pursuit, don't we want to distance ourselves from our mistakes? After an act of great blindness are we not tempted to try denying the past in a vain attempt to forget it? Our Lord had called Peter to live with a great sense of life's depth, to live in conversation with great themes, to live with a sense of context in which everything had meaning, where every event was couched in terms of salvation or loss, redemption or refusal, faith or despair. Having failed at this challenge, Peter had fled back to the surface life, doing what was easy, mindlessly casting his nets into the sea of Galilee as if Jesus had never crossed his path.

Here we must face a fundamental spiritual truth: *We cannot escape God simply by failing God.* We cannot escape God simply by being angry with God. We cannot even escape God by cutting God out of our lives. God's still small voice has a way of reminding us that the only person we are really punishing in running away from God is ourselves and those who love us. God's still small voice will find a way to remind us that we are wasting the talent that God has given us.

Life so often disappoints us.

Life, love, faith and service seldom measure up to our expectations.

*Frequently, spiritual growth comes after we have poured out our life, love, talent and faith into God's service and found rejection, failure and frustration.*

*Life often forces us to face a pivotal question of spiritual and emotional maturity – how do we respond after our efforts and faith have disappointed us?*

Church rolls are filled with inactive people who failed this test of maturity.

Church service didn't fulfill their expectations: people did not praise them when they expected to be praised, didn't approve what they did or applaud what they said, or affirm them when they expected to be seconded.

Their response was to turn away from the family of God and say,

“Well, that's that. Forget this living in a community of faith; the give and take of service is too difficult, it is too bruising. I want to leave it all behind and just live on the surface of existence.”

Real growth in life and love and faith begins after we've poured ourselves into the service of God and others, only to find that our agenda is not that of God's.

That's when we start trying to discern whatever it is God truly has in store for us.

We cannot escape God by failing God.

But on the heels of this great truth we must confront another: *after our great blindness, the primary person you must overcome making yourself useful to God again is yourself.*

Think about our Lord's relationship with Peter:

he had already anticipated Peter's falling short under pressure.

Our Lord's realistic prayer on Peter's behalf was not that Peter wouldn't fall,

but that Peter's failure would not alienate him from God and forever frustrate his spiritual growth.

When Peter sees his Lord standing on the shore, watching him, waiting for him patiently,

he knows that the only barrier of his return unto God is not God's rejection of him,

but his own sense of shame.

He can already see the grace in his Lord's eyes, but the person he must forgive in order to overcome his mistakes is himself.

Most of us find that coming back to God after a period of great blindness, must begin by our forgiving ourselves for who we are and what we have done.

Peter leaped into the water, swimming, splashing, running his way unto his Master.

He may have looked foolish, but it was the wisest thing he ever did. If he had deliberated –

how do I break the estrangement between Jesus and myself? -- he would have been forever paralyzed.

He simply acted on instinct and moved toward the Christ.

Indeed, John's account of this incident contains one particularly amazing sentence about human nature.

John says, “The disciples ate with Jesus, but none of them dared ask him, “Who are you?”

They all knew it, but no one dared break the silence!

Have any of you experienced those silences of estrangement? I'll bet you have.

After all, Peter was not the only disciple guilty of great blindness;

they had all failed their Master at the crucial moment; they all felt guilty and estranged.

Here was the resurrected Lord is in their presence, eating breakfast with them and none of them dared openly acknowledge him. What a picture of the human condition!

Hallmark could double its profits if it could develop a line of cards that said,

“I don't know how to say this, but . . .”

“I don't know how to say this, but I'm sorry I betrayed your trust in me.”

“I don't know how to say this but I want to rebuild our relationship.”

“I don’t know how to say this, but I’ve wasted a lot of my life and talents, but I’m ready to do better.”  
“I don’t know how to say this, but I have horribly made a mess of things.”  
After a great blindness, people become paralyzed by the consequences of some foolish act.  
They ache to break the stalemate, but they don’t know what to do.  
Peter at least had sense enough to leap out of the boat and come to Jesus as he was.

What follows is one of the most poignant conversations in Scripture.  
“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these love me?”  
Peter said, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus answered, “Feed my sheep.”  
A second time Jesus asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”  
“Then feed my sheep.” “Simon Peter, do you love me?”  
Peter is grieved, but the symmetry of his redemption parallels the arc of his failure.  
Three denials. Three affirmations.  
Jesus forces him to face each denial head on and look back creatively upon his great blindness,  
turning a negative into a positive.  
We always think of children as having wild wishes,  
but in my experience adults are those most likely to wish for things that cannot happen.  
After a great blindness many people waste energy wishing they could change what they cannot change.  
What’s done is done. Every time you review your great blindness you will have always said the wrong  
thing, you will always have made the wrong choice. Peter will always have denied Jesus three times.  
But the past is never past. Peter will always have denied Jesus three times,  
but that is not how he is known, for he used that dark night of denial as a springboard  
to grow into the “Rock” that Jesus had always envisioned would be his spiritual potential.  
Charles Colson, the former Nixon White House aide, wrote movingly some years ago of attending  
Pat Nixon’s funeral and seeing the entire Washington power structure gathered around him.  
He thought back two decades to all the energy so many of these great people had expended  
in behalf of ventures that now seemed inconsequential.  
He knew some of them were still trapped in the pursuit of shallow passions – and always would be.  
But Colson viewed the scene from the perspective of one who while in prison had experienced the  
resurrection power of Christ. He now lived as one who used his great blindness as a positive parable  
with others in prisons throughout this world to help them see  
a higher, truer, more meaningful way to live.  
The past is never past. It can be a goad that propels us forward toward a more positive future.

“Peter, do you love me more than these?”  
I don’t think our Lord is asking Peter,  
“Do you love me more than you love your friends, more than you love this easier life?”  
No, I think our Lord is asking, “Peter, do you think you are better than these other guys?”  
The voice that answers is a chastened voice, a wiser voice,  
a voice that has been through the crucible of great blindness and emerged.  
Gone is his juvenile competitiveness. Gone is his false pride.  
Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know how you have failed in your life, but I know this:  
we are not supposed to waste anything. *We are not supposed to waste anything!*  
All of us have gained some lessons the hard way, maybe not the best way – but we have learned them!  
Having gained that knowledge, let us use it for God’s glory in a redemptive fashion.  
Sometimes, the former drunk or the former addict serves as the most powerful tool  
in saving someone else from a life of dependency;

Sometimes, the person whose own marriage has failed gives him or her insight into saving another relationship or comforting someone whose own marriage has sundered. In my experience, *sometimes the person who has wandered most can offer the best advice on how best to go straight. Sometimes, it is the person once most lost who can tell you how best to be found.* Whatever we have experienced in life we are not supposed to waste it. We are supposed to use it for God's glory.

"Feed my sheep," our Lord says.

Let me try to explain the exact nature of these words by means of one parable.

Some years ago, one of my rafting buddies brought a friend who was driving a new white BMW convertible.

Another of my friends, a wild woman to be sure, looked upon that car with a positive lust.

Immediately, she started dropping hints like "I sure like that snazzy, beautiful car.

I sure bet it would be fun to drive that car."

One afternoon, as they were headed back to camp from the river,

the BMW driver pulled over, threw the keys to the wild woman and said, "Drive it."

"Really?" "Drive my car 'round these mountains roads."

Within a instant my friend the wild woman stuck those keys in a white BMW,

told her companion to put her seat belt on tight, then drove off with a look of utter joy.

That's what Jesus is saying to Peter when he said to him, "Feed my sheep!"

It was not a command but an invitation!

He was saying, "I'm giving you the keys to the kingdom, to open up people's lives. Drive with joy!"

When Jesus says to us, "Feed my sheep," he is saying to us,

'In my eyes, you are not just a fisherman, not just a secretary, or a lawyer or a businessman or a student or a teacher. *You are an instrument of redemption.*

I hand you the keys to my kingdom. Drive my grace into people's lives.

Sure you are flawed. Sure you are wounded.

So are the very people I am trying to reach.

Feed my sheep.'

It doesn't matter that we have been afflicted by the great blindness.

What matters is what we do after the great blindness.

What matters is what we do after we discover that God's grace is greater than all our sin.

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