

Bible verses: John 21: 1-12

Later, Jesus appeared once again to a group of his disciples by Lake Galilee.^[a] ³ Peter told them, “I’m going fishing.” And they all replied, “We’ll go with you.”^[c] So they went out and fished through the night, but caught nothing.⁴ Then at dawn, Jesus was standing there on the shore, but the disciples didn’t realize that it was him!

⁵ He called out to them, saying, “Hey guys! Did you catch any fish?”^[d]

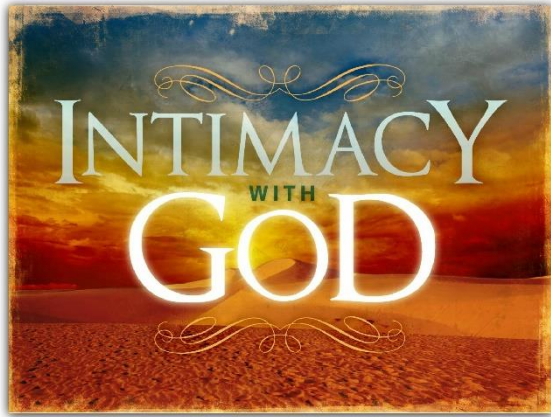
“Not a thing,” they replied.

⁶ Jesus shouted to them, “Throw your net over the starboard side, and you’ll catch some!” And so they did as he said, and they caught so many fish they couldn’t even pull in the net!

⁹ And when they got to shore, they noticed a charcoal fire with some roasted fish and bread.^[g] ¹⁰ Then Jesus said, “Bring some of the fish you just caught.”¹¹ So Peter waded into the water and helped pull the net to shore.

It was full of many large fish, exactly one hundred and fifty-three,^[h] but even with so many fish, the net was not torn.

¹² “Come, let’s have some breakfast,” Jesus said to them.



One of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus that illustrates the power of the gospel is this story of intimacy in John 21. Augustine has said that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” Finding soul rest in God is what intimacy with God is all about. I think that truth is behind all the various religions and desperate searches people make to find meaning and any source of spiritual strength in this world. What we all want it to be loved and to have purpose in life. And as we come to graduation and the end of another academic year, that sense of

purpose and visitation by God is even more pressing. We all need a fresh touch from God, don’t you agree, beloved? And what’s so amazing about the God we serve is that He knows the depths of our hearts and what exactly meet those deepest needs.

So let’s unpack this intimate story and see how God wants to draw near to us as we move to our next steps in the future.

Principle #1 - Failure

1. We start with a foundational principle in an intimate walk with God. **Principle #1: You will fail if you trust yourself and God will see to it that you do, until you put God first, not what you are comfortable with or have always done.**

The story begins in John 21 with Peter’s words in v. 3: “I’m going out to fish.” No problem with that on one hand. This was Peter’s former vocation. It is how he fed his family. And he had partners in the fishing business – others who had also been called as apostles of the Lord Jesus. So, when Peter said he was going out to fish, his co-laborers all went with him – Thomas, Nathanael from Cana, the sons of Zebedee James and John, and two other disciples. How many times we do what they did – at an in-between time of uncertainty, we go back to what’s familiar. We return to our old lifestyles when we can’t figure out the next step in our lives.

But notice that their return to the familiar was a fruitless pursuit. “They fished all night and caught nothing.” V.3. They failed to see the fruit of what they had set out to do. They came up empty.

There are several lessons as this story begins, beloved - none the least of which is that if you trust in your own understanding and order your life according to what you think is comfortable and familiar, but does not fit with God’s direction for you, you will come up empty.

In the excellent new book I just reviewed, *Upside –Down Spirituality, the 9 essential failures of a faithful life*, Chad Bird celebrates this kind of failure. He says God wants us to die to our self – our idea of the good life, our success, our notoriety, our achievements, our comfortable choices. “In fact, what we deem our strengths are, in God’s estimation, [are] often graver problems than our weaknesses because they breed confidence in ourselves. Instead, Christ...kills us by pulling us up (p.21-22) onto the cross with him. We die with Jesus. Co-bleed with him. Are co-buried and then co-resurrected with him.,,Dead with Jesus to our misplaced aspirations, our selfish dreams, our egocentric universe. God is not in the business of making us better [or successful by the world’s standards]; he’s on a mission to make us dead.” (Chad Bird, *Upside –Down Spirituality, the 9 essential failures of a faithful life*, Baker Books, 2019, pp. 21-22.)

Bird calls our problem “the Nebuchadnezzar Syndrome...It channels our appetites in a multitude of directions but never toward Christ. It seduces us into believing that our peace, our fulfillment, our purpose are found in a life where we get what we want. Where all our dreams come true. Where we believe in ourselves. And where even God believes in us. In other words, this syndrome aids us to pursue a life in which everything revolves around us. Our desires become the touchstone of what is good or bad. He quotes Prov. 16:25 “*There is a way which seems right to a man but its end is the way of death.*” The Hebrew word for “way” is “derek, which refers not only to a path or road but a way of life.” (Bird, *Ibid.*, pp.37- 38)

This, he says, also refers to “the hallmarkization of our heart” for modern man. From the culture’s perspective the heart is now “little more than a dumpster of emotionalism” – making choices based on “what meets our emotional needs...Therefore, to follow our heart, in our cultural parlance, is to do what feels good, what seems best for us, what meets our felt needs, what makes us happy, what completes us...But the hazard with following our heart...is [it] often leads to a narcissistic life where all that matters is our happiness, our satisfaction, our contentment, our fulfillment. To follow our heart, in other words, is often shorthand for running from God to chase after pseudo-gods, especially the idol of Me” (Bird, p p69-.70).

This is what God wants to put to death in each of His followers. As Bird says, “To deny ourselves is to say no to the entire universe we have concocted in our minds in which we rule over our castles in the air; become heroes of our own sagas, saviors in our own gospels, and followers of our own hearts...To deny ourselves is to affirm that everything to which we say yes apart from God is sin...To be a disciple of Jesus, to follow him instead of our hearts, necessitates our complete incorporation into him (Bird, pp. 76-77). This is why God worked it out so that when Peter and colleagues went back to fishing, they caught nothing. At this point after Christ’s resurrection and appearance to the disciples several times previously, the failure made Peter ready to truly follow God’s agenda for his life.

Because, you notice, as the story goes on, that Jesus calls out to these exhausted fishermen who had fished all night and caught nothing, and tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. Now, rationally, that makes no sense at all. If fish were out there, these disciples would have caught them. But Jesus came and repeated His signature miracle that marked the beginning of their walk with Him, so there was no mistaking His identity and power. They cast their net on the other side of the boat, as he said, and came up with so many fish that they couldn’t even haul that net into the boat. With that miracle, the disciples all knew the stranger who had shouted to them from the shore was the Lord.

Principle one – Jesus comes to us when we have gone back to our own ways. And He allows us to fail.

Principle #2 Miracle

But principle 2 as God draws near: He then shows His power and love to us in an unexpected miracle.

He does something we obviously couldn’t do. Once we learn that we can’t run our lives and be self-sufficient and succeed in the world’s eyes on our terms or the world’s terms, God demonstrates what the life in Him looks like – with His sufficiency alone. Only when we fail in our self-based efforts are we are willing to turn to Him for everything and trust His sufficiency.

Principle #2 proves the sufficiency of God without a doubt. 153 large fish. And, as they hauled that net ashore the net wasn't even broken. A double miracle.

Principle #3 ***"Come and eat Breakfast"***

But the story of God drawing near in John 21 isn't over. Jesus didn't just provide 153 large fish for his exhausted failed fishermen. **Principle #3: he provided breakfast** – already ready as they came ashore. His words "Come and have breakfast" are the words of invitation God is always saying to His people. Come and let me feed you. Come and be satisfied, not with the pseudo gods of the culture that promise success and happiness – all of which are illusory. No, God promises to feed us with real food. As we hear His invitation in Isaiah 55: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread and your labor of what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest of fare." Isa. 55:1-2. 'Come and feed your soul on My Word' "that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Notice the next verse – which is God's promise for those who do feast on God's Word: *You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's renown.*" Isa. 55:11-13).

Principle #3 when God draws near – He will feed our souls with all that heals our woundedness, redeems our guilt and shame, and restores us to live the abundant life in community with Him that He has designed for us. "Come and have breakfast."

Principle #4 Forgiveness and Healing

And still the story is not over. **Principle #4 When God draws near to Peter, and to each of us, He also forgives our sin and heals us of whatever in the past has burdened our soul.** "The last time Peter stood over a charcoal fire, he denied Jesus (Jn.18:18). Now Jesus makes him stand over another charcoal fire (Jn.21:9) and with it, review old memories and remove them. " (Gary Burge, NIV Application Commentary, John, p. 596.) Removing those memories is the critical piece. As Commentator Burge says "The work of the church can only go forward when we are unburdened of our destructive memories through the gracious forgiveness of God. When this happens, we will be empowered and transformed and made ready to represent Jesus with a rejoicing heart." (p.596). Without this healing, Peter could have gone on in ministry always trying to compensate for the failings of his earlier life. This sort of Christianity is destructive...Or, Peter could have become a man filled with despair...Yes, he could have continued in ministry, having packed away the burden of his sin in some of the deepest recesses of his heart. But it would have eroded his soul. Self-criticism, depression and a spiritual pessimism would have characterized his work. This burden would have sapped his energy but because of his fear of disappointing himself and God once more, he could not quite. Without realizing it, the Christianity he promoted would become destructive to himself and to others. Any ministry like this knows nothing of the "rejoicing heart" Jesus promised in the Upper Room in John 16" (Burge, Ibid., p.595-596).

Failure. Miracle. Feeding. Healing. All leading to principle #5.

Principle #5 Being sent out

Principle #5 Then He sends us out in our weakness to serve His needy world. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three times Jesus asked the question to cover for each of Peter's three denials. Because of those denials, Peter couldn't bring himself to use the word "agape – God's selfless abiding love that Jesus used in his question. Peter could only answer 'Yes Lord I love you with a friendship love.' But even though Peter couldn't reach God's standard, Jesus "condescended to Peter's self-evaluation, saying, in effect: Even if you do not trust your own emotions far enough to apply the word "agape" to them, you still should *feed my sheep*. Our duty to Christ should depend, not upon the strength of our subjective feelings [which we have learned are terrible unreliable and egocentric] but upon our realization of what Jesus has done for us." (notes from Oxford NIV Scofield Study Bible, John 21).

Wise words for those sent out by God

And that brings us to this time of graduation and the ending of another academic year. As God sends you out, I want us to heed this word from former pastor/teacher Warren Wiersbe. Although it is originally written for those called into fulltime ministry as pastor, it is relevant to each of us:

“If God has called you, then he has given you what you need to do the job. You may not have all that others have, or all you wish you had, but you have what God wants you to have. Accept it, be faithful to use it, and in due time God will give you more. Give yourself time to discover and develop your gifts. Accept nothing as a handicap. Turn it over to God and let him make a useful tool out of it. After all, that’s what he did with Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

He adds: “Often I receive letters and telephone calls from anxious chairmen of pulpit committees, all of whom want me to suggest a pastor for their churches. “What kind of a pastor do you need right now?” I always ask, and the reply usually comes back, “Oh, a man who is about forty years old, a good preacher, evangelical...” If I don’t interrupt them, they usually go on to describe a combination of Billy Graham, Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, Mother Teresa, and The Lone Ranger.

“Forgive me,” I usually say when they take a breath, “but that’s not what I had in mind. What kind of ministry does your church need just now— evangelism, missions, administration, teaching, or what? After all, very few people can do everything.” The long silence that follows tells me that Brother Chairman and his committee have not really studied their church to determine its present and future needs. How, then, can they ever hope to find the right pastor to meet those needs?

Preaching is not what we do; it’s what we are. When God wants to make a preacher, he has to make the person, because the work we do cannot be isolated from the life we live. God prepares the person for the work and the work for the person and, if we permit him, he brings them together in his providence. Knowing we are God’s person, in God’s place of choosing, to accomplish God’s special work ought to be sufficient encouragement for us to weather the storm and do our very best. God knows us better than we know ourselves. He’d never put us into a ministry where he could not build us and use us. ‘ Warren W. Wiersbe “Your preaching is Unique,” CT May 2019

Jesus comes near to each of us today, at the end of this semester and the celebration of graduation for two of our members, to show us first how futile it is to trust ourselves. There will be no fruit in our life if that is our priority. So some failure may be ahead for us to get that message. At the point of failure the culture will shame you and condemn you because its values are based on the success of self. But this is not God’s viewpoint. So know, beloved, that when failure comes the community of faith will be there for you. We will help you keep God’s perspective and be your strength and support and confidence. You don’t need to go through failure alone.

And as a community we will help you see when God comes near to show you His power and do something (we call it a miracle) that you absolutely cannot do. But he does so much more. He invites us into intimate relationship with Him where He feeds our soul. His invitation to ‘come and have breakfast’ is the equivalent of Isa 50:4: – *morning by morning He wakens our ear to hear as one who is taught.*” (Isa. 50:4). And finally, he takes that strength and sustenance to a new level as He heals us of whatever wounds, guilt or shame from our past failings – Heals us and then commissions us to go out to care for His people and His work in the world.

Failure – miracle – feeding – healing – being sent out. This is what intimacy with God looks like. John 21 is about how much Jesus loved his disciples, even when they returned to their old lifestyles because they couldn’t figure out the next step in their lives. He revealed himself with a miracle – that also met their needs for food as well as faith. Then He prepared a meal for them after they had fished all night and caught nothing. He restored and forgave Peter and He healed him of the wounds of his past failings and sent him out in freedom to be who God called him to be.

It is yet another example of the power of the gospel. We have such great news of Jesus to share with the world. So, for all of us, this is our encouragement and marching orders as we leave this semester or academic program behind and move forward to what Jesus has next for each of us.

In His name and for His sake.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Help us this day live in Your abundant supply of grace and mercy that reveals You and refreshes our body so we can live out Your eternal purpose for our lives. Thank You that You draw near in intimacy, love and mercy. What a privilege to be Your followers, Lord. I could sing of Your love forever. Let's do that now. Amen.

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 5/12/19

Song of response: I could sing of your love forever.