Judges 16:28-30, John 21:15-19

The rehabilitation of Peter

This has been a pretty tough last few days for all of us. We are in mourning as both my Yankees and your Phillies went down to defeat. Is there hope after defeat? Penn State won. It reminds me of the little boy who was in a hotel lobby pounding away at a piano and totally disturbing all of the people sitting and reading the paper and trying to enjoy their coffee. Finally, you could tell that one man had had enough and was going to do something about it. As he walked over to the boy everyone watched wondering what would happen. He got behind the boy, stretched out his arm and for every pounding series of notes the boy would hit, the man would cover it up with another different series of notes that fit perfectly in the order. He covered the caucophany with melody.

We actually have had quite a few discordant notes as a number of our dear members have passed away over these last few weeks. But one thing that we learn today in both of our Scriptures is that no matter how jarring or how discordant the or off key the notes of our life are, God is always there surrounding us and smothering us with his love.

Our Bible stories, and especially our New Testament reading, remind us that no matter how badly we mess up or sin, or no matter how insignificant we think we are, God still has plans for your life that will contribute to His kingdom.

**READ**

This past week Steve Jobs passed away. Now, I’ve never really given much thought or time to him or what he has done, but over this past week I listened to some of the things that he said, and they were pretty significant and had quite an overlap that could applicable to the Christian faith. At a speech that he gave to the Stanford graduating class he said that he learned something very important when he came face to face with death. Listen to his words, you know they teach us at seminary that quotes that we think are really significant lose their meaning when they are repeated. This one is significant, I hope you can hear it. He had just been diagnosed with cancer: Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

Both of our Scriptures today deal with protagonists who come face to face with the harsh realities of life. One of our favorite Sunday School stories that we have ever known is that of Samson. Even songs have been made including the duo of Samson and Delilah. But if you look closely at the Scripture that we read this morning, and the context of that Scripture, you will see that he is not a great act to follow. He was a womanizer who could not keep a secret even if it was a secret that was given to him by God Himself. We don’t see him following God’s will very closely at all. Sorry to disappoint you, but the story of Samson is a bit like the nursery rhymes that we learned as kids growing up such as: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I shall die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Talk about scarring children for life.

It is a great Bible story, but theologically it is very disturbing. What we read today is a result of what happened earlier in Samson’s life. After his first marriage he married Delilah who spent all of her time trying to decipher how to defeat her husband. She finally succeeds, he succumbs to her pressure. They cut his hair, he is weakened, they bind him gouge out his eyes, and then bring him into the large arena for entertainment and to show off to the population the most hated man in the history of the Philistines.

It was Samson’s own fault that he was in the predicament in which he found himself. He messed up. A great ending for this story would be that he recognized the wrong that he did, he asks for forgiveness, and then moves on in his life.

Instead, we hear him praying to God: let me have revenge, just this one time. Be careful what you pray for, because he got his strength back and with one push he knocked the building down, killing thousands of Philistines and himself in the act. That, theologically, is a problem for me. There is no rehabilitation. There is no great story of reconciliation that as Christians we espouse and lift up as God’s way. I have to tell you, Samson this past week stopped being one of my favorite Bible characters.

When he was faced with the realization that he didn’t have much to live for, he died a desperate death. It reminds me of the time that I was interviews in Moscow by Al-Jazeerah about the work that we were doing in Moscow. After the interview I came home and went online to find the interview. Right next to my interview on the screen was a video taken of a muslim radical firing some kind of rocket propelled device at our troops the whole time saying in the camera God is great, until our troops found him and killed him. Murder and death for the sake of vengeance is never right. It removes any hope of rehabilitation which is what God is all about and what he wants.

But Peter, now this is a different story. The rehabilitation of Peter was found in love. You are going to have to stay with me now in the Scripture because we are going to be looking at some words and substituting them for Greek words. Just stay with me and trust me as we go through this. The context for this Scripture is Jesus has been raised from the dead but the disciples have just gone back to their normal way of life. They are out fishing, doing that which they know best. Jesus is walking on the shoreline and they don’t even recognize him until he tells them to cast their net after a night of nothing on the other side. They do and the net is so full that it is almost breaking. Then, and only then, do they recognize him. Peter jumps into the water nearly naked, they have a huge feast, and then we pick up the Scripture.

We went to this place as well, and saw the rock with the burn marks where Jesus and his disciples were on the edge of the sea of Galilee. They sit around talking to each other when this strange dialogue takes place between Jesus and Peter. Remember, Jesus had big plans for Peter earlier on, in fact, Some see Peter as the one through whom all Apostles and thus all clergy have their succession. Jesus had very high hopes for him. Jesus has high hopes for us as well.

Peter had high hopes for himself as well, didn’t he? Remember in both Mark 14:29 and the parallel in Matthew 26:33 when he answers Jesus and says: Even if all become deserters, I will not. But we know what happens. He really messes up. He denies Jesus three times, pretty much right in his presence. You can’t do any worse than that, can you? Think of the worse thing that you have ever done. I know, you don’t want to, it makes you cringe, probably. It doesn’t even come close to what Peter has done. And even if it comes close, stay with me, because there is good news ahead for all of us.

The three times that Peter denies Jesus is matched in our Scripture with three questions that Jesus asks Peter about his love for him. I call this Peter’s rehabilitation. But you don’t get the full sense of how Peter is rehabilitated without knowing the Greek. This is where you need to stay with me. The writer of John uses two different words for the one word that we find here for love. The two words that he uses are Philae and Agape. Philae means a brotherly type of love, just like the city Philadelphia. You’ve heard this before. It is a deep love, a consistent love that we can have for each other. Agape, well, that is very different. Agape is the type of love that is consistently used for the deepest possible love imaginable. The love that God shows for us and the love that God expects us to have for him.

Go to your Bibles and see how it progresses in the Greek. Peter, do you agape me. Do you love me as your Lord and Savior, do you love me as God, do you love me with the deepest love imaginable that is unconditional and without precedence? Peter responds, you know that I Philae you. I love you like a brother. Come on, fist bump. Second time, Peter, do you Agape me, God, you know everything, you know I Philae you. Last time, I get it Peter, do you Philae me Peter. Do you love me like a brother since you can’t really say that you love me as your Lord and your God and since your previous actions certainly showed that you don’t love me in that way, do you at least love me as a brother.

It is at this point where the Bible says that Peter was hurt when Jesus reduced his expectations of him from Agape to Philae. He responds, you know that I Philae you. Now some commentators say that there is no difference between agape and Philae, but we just witnessed the rehabilitation of Peter and it hinges on Jesus’ change in usage of the one word Love that we hear. The hurt that he feels absolutely is a result of the hurt that comes when you have been confronted with a sin that deep down you know you have committed, you have been called out.

This past week while I was in Florida I spent some time with a family that I had spent a lot of time with while first their daughter and then their son went through drug rehab. I was reminded over and over again that until they are hurt deep down inside and recognize that they are naked in the eyes of God, it is very difficult to recover…ever. It has to hurt.

Peter’s rehabilitation has to remind those of us who have denied Jesus either in our life through the times we have really messed up, in our families, whenever, that Jesus wants us to love him. This is such an important message for all of us. There is no point of no return in the eyes of our Savior. He will always take you back. But, we have to be hurt, we have to recognize our sin, we have to see where we have fallen short of the glory of God so that he can reach out to us and say I love you.

Some of us may be able to identify not so much to a time that we have had a cataclysmic mess up, but you just don’t feel significant enough to play a role in the kingdom of God. This Scripture, and many like it, point to the hope that we all have that God is able and wants to use us.

The last command Jesus gives to Peter after this exchange is, okay then, now that you are rehabbed, follow me. Don’t sit back and wait, but let’s take on the world. The good news of Peter’s rehab is that he was chosen not because of his worthiness. Actually, it was quite the opposite. He was chosen in spite of his sin and in spite of who he was.

There is the story of the cracked pots. A man was commanded to take two pots on a pole to fill up a bath up on the hill. As he made his way up the hill he noticed that both of the pots were cracked, but he couldn’t get new ones. He quickly became frustrated and was about to throw them away after a number of trips, when the pots said, wait, look at the side of the road next time you go down. And sure enough, when he did, he saw a row of flowers on either side of the road exactly where the drips of water had touched down after his many trips.

You know, this church is full of cracked pots, it is full of petulant kids banging away at the keys. But the flowers that have come up, the melody that is resounding is amazing. The love and care that you have exhibited to those families who are suffering the loss of loved ones especially these last few weeks, is inspiring. Not bad for sinner, not bad at all.

The purpose of our new life and communal life in Christ is to live as rehabilitated people. We do have to acknowledge our sin, it prevents us from thinking we are to take credit, but embrace our mission of disciples of Jesus as we follow him.