

Easter 3 Sunday, Year C,

Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh

5th May, 2019

Acts 9:1-6 NIV / John 21:1-19 NIV

When you were growing up, do you remember the phrase "Do-Over"

that was often used during playtime?

It would sometime happen during games like kick ball.

The kicker would wallop the ball into the air over toward the trees.

The ball would then bounce it way down through the branch

and then get stuck.

The ball would now be out-of-play

and the game would have to stop until the ball was freed.

Instead of penalizing the defensive team

by allowing the kicker to run the bases and to insure a fair game,

the phrase is yelled out, "Do-Over."

At that, the kicker would be allowed the chance to kick a "Do-

over."

It was always nice to have a "do-over," a second chance.

Then once we grow up and get older,

it seems like we don't seem to have as many opportunities for "do-overs."

And the ones we get we can't always take advantage of,

such as the following letter sent by the County of Greenville in South Carolina

which read, "Your food stamps will be stopped effective March, 1992,

because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you.

You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

Yet we do appreciate those rare occasions when we are alive

and able to take advantage of a second chance, don't we?

So much of our lives are spent forging ahead, not looking back,

trying to make sure we do things right the first time.

But we make mistakes, we have regrets,

and often we never get or take the opportunity to make things right,

to get a "do-over."

Which make those rare opportunities when they arise so very valuable.

Our friend Peter found such an opportunity in our gospel lesson this morning.

Today's reading is a little different.

At the end of the previous chapter, we have a clear closing and commission,

then we have this last chapter which seems kind of "tacked on."

Most biblical scholars agree that this was added much later to the original text.

So our job then is to decide what was so important

to add this epilogue to a work

that had already been circulating a little while.

We come upon a scene in this reading of some of the disciples who had returned to Galilee,

probably more accurately sought refuge back in their home turf of Galilee.

They had had a pretty rough time of it.

Jesus was dead, then he was alive and in the room with them,

then not, then back.

Everyone seemed to be after them, like they had come for him,

so they headed back north, to their old, familiar world,
the one they knew and felt safe and comfortable in.

And Peter, probably feeling the most stress,
decides to take his mind off of things and go fishing.

After all, it's what his livelihood was for years
before this prophet-rabbi showed up
and turned his whole world upside-down.

Besides, he probably had a lot of guilt that was pulling him down.

Jesus told him he would betray him three times.

He was shocked and quite frankly a little offended
that his beloved teacher would even suggest this.

Yet, before the cock crowed in the morning, he had in fact done it.

How could he be so weak he was probably thinking to himself, and unfaithful.
He just needed to get on the water and get busy with work,
take his mind off of things.

Yet the fish just weren't biting. Figures, he probably thought.
Just one more thing gone wrong.

Then this guy on the shore shows up cooking breakfast and lo and behold,
the nets fill with fish.

It's Jesus and he gets so excited he wades through the water to get to him.
But that's where it gets interesting. Initially it seems like old times.

Table fellowship with Jesus, sitting around and talking,
Jesus serving them food.

However he seems aloof, the warmth seems to be lacking.

Jesus is not addressing him by the nickname, Peter,

that he gave him, the rock.

Instead he's using his old name, Simon.

Three times he asks him, "Do you love me?"

Man, no missing the symbolism there.

Three times Peter denied him,

three times he asks, "Do you love me?"

It's almost like he's testing the waters,

wondering if Peter really does love him anymore.

Or is it something different? Is Jesus instead giving Peter a second, or even a third chance?

After all, this is brash old Peter we are talking about.

Someone whose voice often seems to be ahead of his thought.

In today's world we'd have him tested for ADD or ADHD.

He seems to speak without thinking,

to jump into action with little thought for the consequences.

Yet here was Jesus giving him another chance,

granting him forgiveness despite his denial of Jesus when it really mattered,

when Jesus was being persecuted, not just on Peter's behalf,

but everyone's.

But that's part of the reason we're all here, isn't it?

We, too, can really mess up,

and this is one place we can come and not worry about judgement for our mistakes.

Instead we're greeted with love and acceptance.

That's the point Jesus is making with Peter.

It all comes down to love, “do you love me?”

Love is lifted up as the basic qualification for Christian service.

To hear the strong call of God's chosen that one is forgiven and free from guilt

helps take the pressure off and relax,

and makes it possible to settle into a place,

to become part of a community, to set down roots.

It means being able to offer hospitality, to “feed my sheep”,

to offer some grilled fish and bread to those who are hungry,

whether symbolically in spiritual nourishment,

or in real food for physical needs.

It means learning the stories of joy and struggles

of those who come through the doors,

not just meet and greet and move on.

What does it mean to be invested in the stories of others?

Hearing the stories of others

expands the horizons of one's own social location and cultural experiences.

It gives insight of the work of God in the lives of others,

in the community around us,

and gives God's community insight

into how they can incarnate

God's freedom and forgiveness for the world around them.

But Peter is also told to “tend or care for my sheep.”

This is a reminder that ministry is not simply about putting down roots

and dwelling in a place

and being hospitable when people come into the congregation.

There is always the tension of being rooted

as well as being sent as ambassadors and servants of Christ.

The cries beyond the congregation can be deafening.

Stepping out and responding to God's call in our lives

may prompt one to go in unanticipated directions

for which one feels totally unprepared, as an individual,

and as a community of faith.

Jesus points out in our message today that contrast.

When we are young, before we set down faith roots,

we go where we will, and do what we want.

Yet when we've matured in our faith, and been called by Christ,

we are led by our belts in directions that may not be familiar.

But answering the call is what we're all about, what Jesus was certainly about.

However, we are not immune from the weariness life can sometimes need.

We too sometimes just need this place

to be the sanctuary it is also meant to be.

God's strong message in both of today's passages

is that forgiveness is always available, always possible.

Both Peter and Paul, or in these stories, Simon and Saul,

were given second chances,

opportunities to not only receive forgiveness,

but to seek it, and to witness to it.

Jesus' forgiveness of Peter opens the way

for Peter to try again to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

He certainly knows he failed in the moment of crisis.

Likewise, Paul now realizes his shortcomings in persecuting the early believers,

using sacred texts to clobber others instead of seeking their stories of struggle,
and seeking to welcome them into a faith family built on love, not judgment.

Freedom comes as grace when one knows that one has erred,

has failed to do the right and just thing in the moment of crisis,

and is given another chance to try again.

That freedom that came to Peter at the end of the Gospel

opens new ways that bear witness to Jesus in concrete ways.

When one has been given another chance to get it right,

there is often a sense of urgency to take action to make things right again.

The theme throughout the Gospel of John, and amplified in John's epistles,

is one of a community founded in and witnessing to love in all that they do.

I'd like to close with a short example

of the impact seeking and caring for lost sheep can have.

John Kevin Hines is one of a handful of people

who have survived an attempted suicide jump

off the Golden Gate Bridge.

He claims to have told himself that if any one of the people

he rubbed shoulders with on the way to the bridge

noticed he was distraught,

and asked him what was wrong, he wouldn't jump.

That's all it would have taken-

another human being to acknowledge his existence. No one did.

On his way down he got a hold on his life
and asked God for a second chance,
which is miraculously what he got,
or we never would have heard
how he was a smile away from death.

How many John Kevin Hines' live around us, desperate for a kind word,
an open ear to hear their story and to be offered the comfort
they so desperately seek and need.

What are those needs around us
and how can we be witnesses to God's love and grace to the hurt, outside our doors,
as well as inside?

Part of my job is certainly to give comfort to our own flock,
but sometimes it's not my voice the sheep needs or seeks.

Is it yours?

Can you reach out to that someone
whose eyes look like they just want to be engaged by someone, anyone?

How do we witness that compassion to the community around us?

Those are the questions we need to work on together,
as the body of Christ in the world of today. Amen.