



Week 2: God's Grace is Greater Than Our Failings

Day 1 – Matthew 16:13-23

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Understanding the Reading:

Which is he—Stone or Satan?

His name used to be Simon son of Jonah (at least that's who he was when he first got involved with Jesus). But he's a different kind of man now. He's the first person in human history to make a confession of faith in Jesus as the Chosen One of God, so Jesus gives him a new name. Now he's Peter, or *Petros* in Greek, meaning Stone. Simon son of Jonah is the cornerstone on which Jesus will build his Kingdom movement.

We must remember there's nothing extraordinary about Stone. He's perfectly normal people. If you passed him on the street, you wouldn't recognize him, and he wouldn't draw attention. He's nobody and he's everybody. Stone is one of the billions of normal humans you've never heard of and will never meet.

But that's what makes his confession so important. He's all of us. He could be any of us. He *is* us, when we strip away the labels we like to wear. And for a moment—until there's a second person to confess Jesus is the Messiah—Stone is the one believer on the planet, the only believer who has ever lived.

But then Jesus starts being clear about what it takes to be the Chosen One. It means humiliating failure. There's no glory, no fanfare, no approval from the people who matter. And suddenly the Church of Jesus Christ loses its one member. Now Simon isn't Stone anymore. He's Satan. He's the Tempter himself. Tempting Jesus to take the easy way of being the Chosen One; the way of heroics, instead of the right way; the way of sacrifice.

So which is he—Stone or Satan?

Both maybe. But most importantly he is more than a model for the confession of faith; he's a model for the endurance of faith. Peter gets Jesus right, then he gets Jesus wrong, and then he tries again. He doesn't give up. He keeps going.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When have you gotten Jesus wrong? What were the consequences?
2. How do you keep trying in your faith, even when it feels like you're getting it wrong?
3. What are you trying to learn about God these days? What are you struggling with?

Day 2 – Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Understanding the Reading:

Peter *wanted* to take the risk. It was his idea to walk on the water; in fact, he gives Jesus the command to call him out onto the water. He'd never walked on water and there was no reason to believe that he could do it. But he wanted to take the risk.

Whenever we do something new, there's a risk. And anytime we're up against a risk, if we don't want it badly enough, we can come up with a ton of reasons not to do something that lead to us walking away. But Peter reminds us that we have to want the thing, whatever it is, more than we fear the problems and potential issues that go with it.

Peter's sinking reminds us that we have to keep our eyes focused on Christ. It's easy to get caught up in stuff that feels important, but the minute we take our eyes off of Jesus, that stuff will end up bogging us down. Peter was able to walk on water when he was focused on Jesus. But as soon as he looked down at the waves - when his attention shifted from Jesus to the storm - he began to panic, feel inadequate, and began to sink.

I am reminded of those cartoon characters who occasionally run off a cliff without noticing it - like Wile E. Coyote in the Roadrunner cartoons. For a while, Wile continues to pump his legs and actually runs as well on thin air as he had on the ground. Then suddenly he notices he has run off a cliff. He panics, holds up a little sign, *Save me*, and plummets thousands of feet. It wasn't running off of the cliff that did him in; the fall started when he looked down.

The best part of this story is the word "immediately" in verse 31. Jesus doesn't let Peter flail around or suffer because of his distraction and fright. Jesus immediately reaches out to save him. Like Peter, Jesus reaches out to us when we get caught up in fear about our problems and take our eyes off of Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What was it that made Peter call out to Jesus and ask him to come out on the water?
2. Is there a risk Jesus has been asking me to take that I have been unwilling to consider up until now? What would it look like for me to allow Jesus to make me braver? Bolder?
3. What kinds of things cause you to take your eyes off of Jesus?

Day 3 - John 13:1-9

¹ Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already decided that Judas son of Simon Iscariot would betray Jesus. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Understanding the Reading:

We read the Bible with the benefit of knowing the whole story, so Peter's objection to Jesus demonstrating this kind of service seems absurd to us. It might even annoy us: "why couldn't you see it, Peter?" But taken on its own, and putting ourselves in Peter's shoes, it is perfectly understandable. Is he confused? This isn't a normal role for a leader. Or is he embarrassed by Jesus' humility that he sees as humiliation? No self-respecting person could allow their peer or leader to humiliate himself by taking on the role of a servant. Peter wants to save Jesus from this shame, but he can't see that it is him that is being saved.

Peter doesn't want a messiah that is a lowly servant. He was, like everyone else, hoping there would be more table overturning or Roman overthrowing. Is Peter so arrogant that he thinks he doesn't need Jesus in this way? After all, the scripture doesn't note him doing any complaining while the other disciples' feet are being washed. It's only when Jesus gets to him that he protests the action.

Peter's expectations of Jesus need to be revised if he is to truly be in relationship with Jesus and lead Christ's church.

What does Peter *need* to learn from this? It isn't just an awkward exchange while cleaning up for dinner. It is a pattern that Jesus wants Peter and everyone else that follows him to emulate: to embrace humble service and love. Our relationships cannot be built on anything other than those things – even when it is excruciatingly hard, even when it is confusing, even when it doesn't fit the cultural norms, even when we can't see the full picture. Humble service and love.

Jesus responds: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Sharing in Jesus starts with this overwhelming display of love.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Put yourself in Peter's shoes. What might motivate the way you respond to Jesus when he starts washing your feet?
2. What stands in the way of you acting out of humble service and love?
3. What does it mean to let Jesus love you?

Day 4 – Luke 22:31-34, 39-62

³¹ "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³ And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" ³⁴ Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me."

³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." ⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done." ⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] ⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, ⁴⁸ but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" ⁴⁹ When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" ⁵⁰ Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹ But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. ⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as though I were a rebel? ⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour and the power of darkness!"

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a female servant, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." ⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" ⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him, for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he

was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

Understanding the Reading:

Peter was on a roll. Before dinner, he protested Jesus washing his feet and then as the dinner was ending, he proclaims to Jesus that he would stay faithful to him even if it means prison and death. Little does he know that Jesus would end up in prison and dead mere hours from that moment. Jesus tells Peter that not only would Peter not stay faithful in those trials, but that Peter would deny him.

I wonder what Peter thought when he heard that? I wonder how you would feel if you heard that from the person you admired the most in the world? I can only imagine the pit-in-your-stomach, hot-all-over-your-body shame that must have overtaken him.

For most of us, if we were sharing a message of forthcoming betrayal, it would likely be delivered with anger, frustration, and pain. But Jesus says to Peter, "**I have prayed for you** that your own faith may not fail, and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." It is not a prayer for Peter not to experience temptation, but to have the strength to overcome the temptation that is coming. It is a powerful testament to Jesus' love, grace, and forgiveness. It is also an important window into the longevity of relationship that Jesus sees. Jesus takes the long view here, seeing the reality of Peter's coming denial but also looking beyond it, giving him a challenge and a purpose, while letting him know that he is covered in prayer.

And then moving at a warp speed from one failing to another, Peter reacts counter to everything he's learned from Jesus when Judas approaches with the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for Jesus. Though the disciple is unnamed in Luke, the Gospel of John tells us that it was Peter who struck the servant of the high priest with his sword.

Peter moves to the other end of the spectrum from flawed to faithful as he follows Jesus to the high priest's house. None of the other disciples follow Jesus - the other gospels tell us that they flee. We see courage and strength in Peter in this following. But just as quickly, he makes the choice to stay safe. He has a failure of nerve.

Verse 61 is a gut punch as we imagine what it must have felt like for Peter when he made eye contact with Jesus. Surely he feels shame. But does he feel anything else? Does he remember Jesus' grace and love and compassion for him? Does he remember that Jesus prayed for him to turn back and strengthen his brothers?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Knowing that God takes the "long view" in relationship with us, does that allow you more freedom to receive God's forgiveness and/or to forgive yourself?
2. What do you think the motivation for Peter's denial was? Do you ever find yourself succumbing to those same motivations?

Day 5 – John 21:4-17

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the

Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

Understanding the Reading:

It's all about love. Love transforms our actions, which may be why Jesus is so insistent on asking Peter if he indeed loves him. Because the disciples are back to fishing. They are doing what they were doing before they ever met Jesus. This return to their trade is a return to comfort and familiarity for the disciples. But love is about a transformation.

With each question and affirmative answer, Jesus gives Peter an action – feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Jesus is entrusting his precious flock to someone who has been marked by denial. This is an epilogue to John's gospel, a reminder that the important thing to remember about Peter is not his unfaithfulness, but about the grace of Christ in his life being far more powerful than his denial.

Whatever Peter was expecting Jesus to say in this first private exchange after his denial, it certainly was not this. You've likely been in situations in which you know you messed up and you think you'll only be able to get past it if the other person would just come out and tell you how they feel or chew you out for it. It would have been better for Peter if Jesus had chastised him for falling into the temptation of fear and self-preservation.

But Jesus doesn't call him out on his failing in the courtyard. He just calls him to transformation. This exchange reminds us that the mission trumps everything. Like a coach to his player telling him to get back out there after he messes up a play, Jesus is saying, "Peter, I have one requirement. Do you love me? Okay, then, get over it. Put your failures behind you; there is work to be done. We don't have the luxury of wallowing in our shame and guilt. We need to get to work: feed my sheep."

Do you love me? So what are you going to do about it?

Questions for Reflection:

1. When have you betrayed Jesus in thought, word, or deed in the past week?
2. Think of a time when you felt welcomed back into the fold.
3. You love Jesus... so what are you going to do about it?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. Do you define yourself by your flaws or your faithfulness?
2. How does Tom redefine failure as a positive thing?
3. What do think led to Peter's denial of Jesus? Name in your group all of the possible motivations. Which one do you relate to the most?
4. What are the ways you deny Jesus in your everyday life?
5. How do your actions, not just your words, answer Jesus' question, "do you love me?"
6. How does being a disciple of Jesus affect every area of my life?
7. How does Peter illustrate a resilient faith?
8. What was your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: