

After The Rooster Crows
John 21:15-25
April 28, 2024

All of us have at least two versions of ourselves. On the one hand, there is the version that represents who we WANT to be. This version is almost always positive. We want to be noble. We want to be honest. We want to be brave. We want to be righteous. We want to be the kind of person who others are glad to have in their lives. We want to be the kind of person with whom God is pleased. On the other hand, there is the version of ourselves that represents who we really are. This version is much more of a mixed bag. Sometimes we are noble, and other times we are petty. Sometimes we are honest, and other times we lie through our teeth. Sometimes we are brave, and other times we hide in fear. What do we do when we are confronted by the difference or the distance between these two versions of ourselves? When we've been caught in a lie. When a friend makes it clear we have betrayed him. When a secret sin finally reveals itself. When the voice of our own guilty conscience is so loud that we can no longer silence it. When that happens, where do we go with the shame?

The Apostle Peter's story gives us the answers we need to that question. To understand why, we need go back to an earlier chapter of that story. Back in John 6, people had begun to turn

away from Jesus, because the things he had to say were simply too hard. Beginning in verse 67, we have this exchange:

“You do not want to leave me too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord to who shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:67-69)”

This is Peter as he wants to be: strong, certain, committed, unwavering. A few chapters later, that self-image becomes even more pronounced. In John 13, when Jesus tells Peter that he will not be able to follow him to the end, Peter boldly declares, *“I will lay down my life for you! (John 13:37b)”* This is Peter’s preferred version of himself: loyal and faithful to the point of death.

Of course, we already know this preferred version of himself will soon have a collision with the real version of himself. It happens in John 18. Jesus has been arrested. He has been hauled before the high priest to begin a long night of questioning and humiliation, which won’t end until the next day when he is hung from a cross. Peter and another unnamed disciple followed the detachment of soldiers who had taken custody of Jesus. They followed as far as the courtyard of the priest’s palace, where they sat outside trying to warm themselves by a fire while Jesus’ trial got underway. Over the next moments, on three different

occasions, bystanders in the crowd asked Peter if he was with Jesus, and all three times, the brave, courageous Peter said, “No.” Three times Peter denied Jesus, because he was afraid that what was happening to Jesus might also happen to him. And in John 18:27, we read, “*Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.*”

This is exactly what Jesus had said would happen. Back in John 13, when Peter had boldly declared his willingness to die with Jesus, Jesus had said, “*Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!*” That rooster would serve as the unavoidable signal that Peter has failed. Well, the rooster has now crowed. Peter has now denied Jesus three times, and even though the text doesn’t say that Peter heard the rooster, we can rest assured that Peter heard it. He has now come face to face with the sinful reality that he was NOT who he wanted to be. He has failed his Lord.

So, what is to become of Peter now? The events surrounding Jesus’ death have now been set in motion. There is no stopping it. There is no going back. Like toothpaste that can’t be put back in the tube, there is no undoing what Peter has done. Is Peter now doomed to live with failure and shame?

Well, the answer to that question might be yes if it weren’t for the story we’ve read this morning. This is another one of

several so-called post-resurrection appearances. The Jesus who died on Friday was raised back to life on Sunday, and over the next several weeks continued to appear to people. And if you ask me, this story brings the full significance of the resurrection to the surface. People will often have all sorts of skeptical reasons to deny the physical resurrection. They will say it is not possible for a dead man to come back to life. All I can say about that is that if you are God, and you can make the entire universe from out of nothing, then raising a dead man back to life is really not a big deal. That's why the real wonder of Easter is not simply that Jesus was raised back to life; it was that he was raised back to life AND came back to the very people who had failed him so miserably the first time around. You would think that by now he would be done with them. But he isn't. The risen Christ still has a place and a purpose for fallible and failed disciples, including Peter.

That brings us to the conversation that now happens. I want to work through this conversation in three episodes, because I think each one reveals something important about how God responds to our failure. As we will come to see, when we fail, God does offer us forgiveness and renewal and the chance to begin again. And if you don't hear anything else I say this morning hear this: that forgiveness is possible only because Jesus moves toward us, even when we've done nothing to deserve it. This is all grace. It

is all the loving, merciful initiative of Jesus. Peter did nothing to warrant what happens in this story. Forgiveness is not the result of something we do to earn it. We don't create the circumstances for it. We simply receive it. But as this story makes clear, for that forgiveness to take full effect in us, there are some very specific and sometimes very uncomfortable things we must do.

Episode one: Jesus forces Peter to confront the specifics of his denial and failure. Jesus was the master teacher. He knew not only what to say and when to say it, but also exactly what to do and how to do it. In this instance, Jesus didn't even have to use words – at least not directly. Everything about this moment was set up so that Peter could not avoid the truth of what he had done.

For starters, notice the little detail about the charcoal fire. When the disciples came ashore after their miraculous catch, Jesus had a fire burning with some fish already cooking on it. This was a remarkable sign of hospitality and grace. Jesus was making ready to feed his sheep. But that fire had to send a shiver up Peter's spine. The last time he had sat next to a fire in Jesus' presence was the night he had betrayed him. I can only imagine the memory of that night came rushing back in. Then notice the threefold question Jesus asked. Not once, or twice, but three times, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. It should be immediately obvious what Jesus is

doing. He is taking Peter back to the three times Peter had denied him.

Why is all this necessary? It's not because Jesus derives pleasure from rubbing Peter's nose in his failure. It is because renewal in Christ requires that kind of honest confrontation with ourselves. Forgiveness requires an honest acknowledgment of the ways we have failed. This is not about some vague desire to be a better person; it is about confessing before God that I have lied, that I have lusted, that I have cheated, that I have been greedy, that I have failed, because until I claim responsibility for my own sin, I cannot be fully cleansed of it. God is ready to forgive us the moment we bring our sin before him, but as long as we refuse to acknowledge that sin, we remain in possession of it.

We all know that person who can never be wrong. No matter what has happened, they have some kind of defense for it, some way avoiding responsibility. That is a refusal to acknowledge failure. And, we have all been part of a conversation where we heard some version of the following statement: "I am sorry that you felt hurt by what I said." That sounds like an apology, but it isn't. That's just a clever way of shifting the blame. What that sentence really means is, "You are the problem; not me. The problem is not that my words were wrong. The problem is just that

you are too sensitive or that you aren't willing to understand things the way I do.”

But as long as we remain stuck in a place where we cannot or will not acknowledge our sin, Jesus' forgiveness will not find full expression in us. When King David was called out for his adulterous and murderous affair with Bathsheba, he didn't try to wiggle out from under it or make excuses for it. He just confessed it. In Psalm 51, he declared, *“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”* I don't know this for sure, but I can't help but wonder if those words might have been filtering through Peter's mind as Jesus pressed him with his three-fold question. Peter had to confront the truth of what he had done. And so do we.

Episode two: Jesus tells Peter to follow him to a different outcome. These are not vague words about simply believing. They are an invitation from Jesus for Peter to follow him into a different kind of life. Peter had tried to follow him on the night Jesus was arrested, but he only followed him so far. Now, Jesus is asking him to follow again, only this time toward a different outcome. As the conversation unfolds it becomes clear that Jesus is asking Peter to follow him the point of martyrdom, which is what happened. Our best historical evidence tells us that Peter was martyred in Rome in

64 AD, during a wave of Christian persecution at the hands of Emperor Nero. The same Peter who earlier denied Jesus did eventually lay down his life for him.

This doesn't mean that Jesus will ask all of us to be martyrs; most of us will not have to pay for our forgiveness with our own blood. But Jesus is asking us to put our forgiveness into practice by following him to a different outcome. To say it differently, to be forgiven means to stop doing the thing we had to be forgiven for in the first place. While none of us will reach moral perfection in this life, Jesus does expect us to make a good faith effort to move towards a different outcome. He does expect us to gain some degree of mastery over the sins that plague us.

Imagine for example, that a couple is having marital problems. They seek out a counselor or a therapist to help them work through their issues, and in the very first session the husband tells the therapist that he is having an affair, and that he has no intention of ending the affair. Well, what good is the counseling going to accomplish? The answer: none. Reconciliation cannot happen in the marriage if people involved aren't willing to stop the behaviors that are destroying the marriage in the first place. Jesus forgives us so we can follow him to a different outcome.

So, if we are struggling with gossip, we need to stop gossiping. If we have taken something that isn't ours, we need to

give it back. If we lied the last time someone asked us a hard question, we need to tell the truth the next time. Forgiveness opens the door to a future that is different than the past. Jesus forgives so that we can follow him to a different outcome.

Episode three: Jesus tells Peter not to compare himself to John, but to focus instead on his responsibilities as a disciple. Towards the end of today's reading, when Jesus has told Peter to follow him, Peter turns and sees John, the beloved disciple, standing there. Peter then asks Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" This is a remarkable insight into human nature. Peter has just been forced to confront something very painful about himself – namely that he has failed his Lord. He has also been asked to take up a new way of life – namely, to be willing to follow Jesus to the point of death. And now his next instinct is to compare his situation to John's. OK Lord, you've shown me how I failed, but what about him. OK, Lord, this is what you've asked of me, but what are you going to ask of him?

Our instinct is to always compare ourselves and gauge ourselves against others. In fact, it's one of our primary ways of dodging responsibilities for our own actions. We think either A) other people screwed up too, so this really isn't a big deal, or B) others screwed up worse than I did, so this REALLY isn't a big deal. But when it comes to our personal accountability before God,

then the question of what others did or did not do doesn't matter all that much. It may be true that approximately 1 out of every 4 men commits adultery, but when it comes to my marriage, it only matters whether I have been faithful. It may be true the culture around me has determined that a hedonistic and materialistic lifestyle perfectly acceptable, but when it comes to my walk with Christ, the only thing that matters is whether I am faithful. It may be true other believers have decided that participation in the church is dispensable and unnecessary, but when it comes to my discipleship the only thing that matters is whether I am sharing in the fellowship of God's people. We are not judged based on what other people's actions. We are judge on whether we have responded to God's specific call on us.

So, when Peter asked about John, Jesus lovingly but firmly said, in essence, "Don't worry about him. I have a plan for him just like I do for you. You focus on being faithful to your responsibilities." And the good news for us is that both men were. Peter bore witness to Christ through his own martyrdom in Rome. Meanwhile, John, who lived to be an old man, was eventually exiled to the island of Patmos, where he had a vision and wrote the book of Revelation. Our faith today is built in part on the testimony of both men.

Christianity is not a private affair. It is meant to be lived in community with other believers. But is a personal affair. The call to follow Christ is a specific call given to every believer, and that call must be lived out in the specifics of each of our personal lives. In order for me to fully embrace the forgiveness that Christ extends to me, I must be willing to tend to my personal responsibilities to Christ. And so must you. To hide behind each other is to hide from our Lord.

Friends, the good news is that Christ does not abandon us to our failure. No matter how deeply we have failed him, there is the opportunity for repentance and renewal. There is no sin so great that it cannot be covered by the power of Christ's forgiving love. But that forgiveness is more than a gentle pat on the back and an easy dismissal of our sins as if they were really no big deal. That forgiveness is a specific and powerful claim on our lives. To live into that power, we must confess our sin. We must move in a new direction. We must be accountable before a personal God. If we do, then the guilt and the shame that our adversary wants to throw at us no longer has power over us.