

“And Now . . . the Rest of the Story”

John 21:1-19

Rev. Denise W. Ingram

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Many of you may be familiar with Paul Harvey, the “most listened to man” in broadcasting. For seven decades, Harvey broadcast his “News and Commentary” program. Along with the news, he shared stories of people’s lives, divulging little known stories or background that cast the characters of the story in a completely different light. Listeners knew the entire picture had been revealed as he signed off, “and now you know . . . the rest of the story.”

Read John 21:1-19.

An old man was crucified head downwards during the reign of Nero roughly around the year A.D. 64. The man had actually requested to be crucified upside down claiming he did not deserve to die in the same manner as his Lord, Jesus Christ.

This man became the leader of the apostles, after Jesus ‘sent out’ his apostles into the world before ascending into heaven. He suggested the replacement for Judas. It was he who spoke up in the disciples’ defense the Day of Pentecost when the crowd wrongly assumed they were drunk, then preached with such inspiration and conviction that 3,000 people converted to Christianity that day. He was the first of the apostles to perform a miracle in Jesus’ name healing the cripple at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. He conducted the defense of John and himself before the Sanhedrin when they received the legal sentence of “forty lashes less one.” After receiving thirteen lashes on each shoulder from the back, and thirteen on the chest from the front, they were commanded not to preach Jesus as Christ and sent home. Yet they returned to the Temple daily to preach this very thing. This apostle was soon renowned for the miracles he did in the name of Jesus. He and John were sent to Samaria where, through the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit came to the baptized believers.

He healed Aeneas, the paralytic at Lydda. He raised to life Dorcas, the woman of many good works in Joppa. While in Joppa, he received a vision convincing him that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears God and does what is right is

acceptable to God.” Believing that vision, he went on to convert and baptize Cornelius, a Roman centurion, along with Cornelius’ entire household at Caesarea. From that time on, he preached not only to Jews and Gentiles but to Romans as well. Just prior to his death, he had been evangelizing in Rome (Rom. 15:20-22) and visited the early Christian church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12). The Apostle who did all these amazing things and performed miracles was none other than Peter. The same disciple who denied knowing Jesus three times. As for the Apostle Peter, now you know the REST OF THE STORY.

It is quite possible Peter’s ministry would not have taken place had it not been for the incident we read about in today’s scripture. It happens at the Sea of Galilee just days after Jesus’ resurrection, not very long after the night Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” It is not meant as rebuke but as absolution for Peter. Peter is offered three invitations to confess his love for Jesus in order to wipe away the three denials just days earlier. Maybe Peter also experienced it as absolution for all the times he had disappointed Jesus---like the time he asked how many times he was supposed to forgive someone as if he was keeping score, falling asleep at the Garden of Gethsemane then impetuously cutting off the ear of a soldier, protesting the foot washing then demanding Jesus wash him completely. This incident reminds us that Jesus acts with grace towards all those to whom he entrusts his ministry. It is Jesus’ grace, not how stellar the life of the disciple has been, that is most important. Not only is Peter forgiven and restored, he is also commissioned – “Feed my lambs . . . tend my sheep. . . feed my sheep.”

Peter is offered the wonderful gift of forgiveness and the gift of another chance. What is it Jesus sees in Peter? Jesus, you may recall, had given Simon the name Peter, “Petra” in Greek meaning Rock, declaring Peter to be the rock upon which he would build the church. Peter is given another chance to BECOME the Rock, to grow into the person Jesus has envisioned he can become. Peter’s transformation can continue as he is given another chance.

Oftentimes, just being given another chance as one follows Jesus is transformational in and of itself. I’m now speaking from my own experience. The date was June 12, 2007. It would have been my 25th wedding anniversary were it not for the divorce proceedings underway. Anyone that has endured a divorce knows there is a certain amount of pain and shame one experiences going through

that process. It is difficult to ignore one's brokenness as a human being going through a divorce. That same day--that very afternoon--the Presbytery would be meeting and I was to be installed as Vice-Moderator during worship. I was and continue to be extremely thankful for God's timing in the situation for I was being given another chance. In the opportunity to serve as Vice-Moderator, Moderator, and Moderator of Council for the Presbytery, it was as if God was saying, "I have a plan for your life and a vision of who you can become for my name's sake and divorce does not negate it. Continue to follow me, continue to grow, become the person I have in mind for you to be." In giving me another chance, God reframed the significance of that day. I experienced the second chance God offered me as transformational --God was going to continue to transform me according to God's plan for my life.

I caught a glimpse of the profound gratitude Peter must have felt as Jesus offered him the gift of another chance.

All of us need the gift of another chance on our faith journeys. We desire to serve Jesus, we yearn to please God and we all fall short of those goals. Being faithful is not easy. It means not just wishing for a better world but being willing to work at it every day. Being faithful is not the task of a day but the task of all of our days, day after day after day. And with the gift of each new day comes the gift of another opportunity.

Many days we may want to retreat to the familiar, as Peter and the others did when they retreated back to fishing, but to experience the full benefit of another opportunity, we need to continue to move forward. Today's scripture passage reminds us actions speak louder than words--don't just say you love; show it by your actions.

Sydney Harris, a newspaper columnist in Chicago in the mid-part of the 20th century, spoke about a talk he gave on creative writing to a group of amateur writers. Afterwards, someone asked, "Mr. Harris, what do you do when you don't feel like writing?" "I write," he answered. "That's the difference between an amateur and a professional. I write even when I don't feel like writing."

Commitment to the task, that's the difference between a nominal follower of Jesus and a truly dedicated disciple. Jesus calls us to use the gift of another day to be about his agenda for our lives rather than retreating to the familiar.

Jesus makes it clear that the gift of another day is not to be taken lightly. There will come a day when there are no more days.

Jesus says, "But then you grow old. You will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you to where you do not wish to go." He is saying to Peter now is your opportunity to get on with the mission I have given you.

Jesus offers Peter the gift of another day to be faithful. There was still time for Peter to become the Rock that Jesus envisioned him to be as the foundation of the church. There was still time for Peter to become the fiery preacher of Pentecost, to confront the high priest, the elders and scribes as they assembled, to preach the good news to Cornelius, to be delivered from prison, to daily preach in the Temple and finally to be martyred in Rome.

Our stories connect with the stories of Peter and the other disciples in that we are also being given the gift of another day to be faithful, the gift of another day to grow towards being the person God created us to be. God is not finished with us. God pursues us as Jesus pursued the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, calling us to become what God envisions we can be and to do what God would have us do.

Like Jesus' first disciples, we too, are challenged to believe that not only can we have the grace of another day, but in that day we can change, and in changing, change the world around us. Do you believe that? How will you act on that belief?

What will our lives demonstrate as . . . the rest of the story?
Amen.