

“Feed My Sheep”
John 21:1-19
April 18, 2010

Fred Snodgrass made one mistake and the world never let him forget it. Snodgrass was playing center field for the New York Giants in the 1912 World Series against the Red Sox. The teams were tied in the tenth inning when a fly ball fell into Snodgrass’s mitt – and he dropped it. The Red Sox won the series, and the error stuck with Snodgrass the rest of his life. Sixty-two years later, when Fred Snodgrass died, guess what the New York Times said in his obituary? “Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead: Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly.”

That’s the way we might have remembered Peter: “Simon Peter, Fisherman: Denied Jesus Christ in 33 A.D.” Peter was standing beside a charcoal fire outside the courtroom where Jesus was on trial for his life when a servant girl recognized him as one of Jesus’ followers. You know what happened next. Peter dropped the ball. He denied knowing Jesus not once. Not twice. But, three times! Three times he muffed it. Then he went outside and wept bitterly over the biggest failure of his life.

That is where his story would have ended if the risen Christ had not shown up. Peter’s obituary could have summed up his life ‘disciple muffed it’ if the risen Christ had not shown up. Of course, WE know that God was working things out all the time, but all Peter knew was that he dropped the ball in the most important game of his life. After that kind of disaster, what’s the use? So he gave up. If he couldn’t be a respectable disciple, he could go back to fishing. I’m going fishing, he said, and the rest of the disciples went with him.

It sounds like the losing side of a campaign. As the workers pack away the buttons and yard signs and sweep up the confetti, they say to each other, “Well, it was good while it lasted, but now, let’s just cut our losses and see if we can get our old jobs back and come out of this with just a little dignity.” Let’s go back to fishing. But, as Peter learned, you can’t ever really go back and pretend like things never happened. He and his friends spent an entire night on the dark water and caught nothing. Great. Now he was a double failure: he had muffed it both as a disciple and as a fisherman.

Then, right after daybreak, when the sky was that early color of peach lemonade, a stranger appeared on the shore and told the fishermen to cast the net on the other side of the boat. They did and they hit a catch so big they could not pull it in. And, what is it about those fish? This is not the first Peter + Jesus = huge catch of fish story. There was another time, another night when Peter had been casting his nets in vain – no bites - and Jesus appeared, got into Peter’s boat and told him to let down his nets, and those nets filled up and Peter cried out, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Jesus responded, “From now on you will be catching people,” and so he turned a night of failure into the dawn of a new calling.

Now, Jesus had been raised from the dead and was again calling out to Peter who had again gone through a night of failure. This time, when Peter recognized Jesus, he got dressed which seems odd to me - exactly what happens on those fishing boats anyway? He got dressed and Jesus joined Peter beside a charcoal fire – the same kind of fire around which Peter had denied his Lord – broke the bread, passed it around and asked Peter, “Do you love me?”

Three times Jesus asked. Three times Peter replied, “Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” With these words, Jesus did what only Jesus could do. Yes, he embraced Peter’s failure and forgave it, but he also restored his identity and renewed his

lost call. It was the first day of the rest of Peter's life and it's the kind of story we live for. Miserable failure to blooming success. A silk purse out of a sow's ear.

You know, you could, in a way, sum up the entire Bible with that old saying. It's certainly true of Peter – someone who had never done anything important, never known anyone important and then he had this shot at following Jesus Christ and out comes the sow's ear. Worth nothing...had it not been for Jesus– who just had a knack for seeing the silk purse. That is an important point. Jesus did not change Peter into something new. He simply recognized the real Peter. That's the story of the whole Bible. God repeatedly looks at dimwitted people, narrow minded shepherds, ignorant fishermen, and God sees chosen people, people of destiny, people who were fully capable of living in holy covenant.

We proclaim the same thing when we baptize someone. You go in the water as a sow's ear, but you come out a silk purse. Why? Because God now sees you through the eyes of resurrection. That changes everything.

Peter muffed it, broke it beyond repair, and morning came and the risen Christ showed up, and what do you know – the denial and the sin that hijacked Peter's hope disappeared from God's view. I'll tell you, as a human being who makes a lot of mistakes, as someone who sometimes says the wrong things and oftentimes thinks the wrong things, what a relief! Our screw-ups are not the last word. They may slow us down and sidetrack us, but they do not have to be the last word. Not now. Not after resurrection. Resurrection means no matter what, we can be the people we were born to be, and it is only sin at work in the world that keeps us from being those people.

That's why Jesus came. And died. And rose. To reverse the debilitating effect that sin has on people. This is where it gets interesting. In the Resurrection of Jesus, God calls the silk purse out of everybody. God expects everybody to at least try to come to him as strong, loving, joyful, productive people! People who will triumph in the midst of life's difficulties. People who will rise to the occasion. People who will make the world a better place.

That is the Good News of Easter! Once old 'denied Jesus three times' Peter met the Good News of Easter in the flesh, out came the 'Peter the disciple.' He was no longer the guy who muffed up everything. God put him right back in the game, and he had important work to do. He had to let everybody else know that they were silk purse ready too...as do we.

That's our job - whatever our reputation, whatever our mistakes, whatever ideas we hold about how we've always been, with the resurrection, everyone of us has a calling – it's not just clergy who are called. We are ALL called to extend Good News to the people around us – that is the work of the Church. Now, here comes my bias. I believe that the Christian Church in our day must be reinvented. You don't have to look very far to see what the Church has become mostly about. Will Willimon gives us a kick in the pants when he tells of driving down a South Carolina road. He says: "I pass a church with one of those sign boards out front. This sign read, "Repent! Now is the day of salvation." Just down the road was a church of a different denomination. It also had a sign out front. The sign proclaimed, "Happy Mother's Day. Virtues are learned at Mother's knee, vices at some other joint." Willimon says, I thought to myself, "What does the world, that knows nothing about Christianity except for those signs, think about the Christian faith?" Almost next door was yet another church with a sign out front that read, "Big Garage Sale Next Saturday! Cheap prices. Great deals." He was getting very disheartened until he saw the next sign. "We've got room for you at our table. Hospitality practiced here. Everybody welcome." Wow! Church of the large table. Trouble was, he looked again and saw that the sign was in front of the Shady Dale Restaurant, not a church!" I'd put it this way:

church has become more of an institution that serves ourselves, and less of a ministry that reaches out to others. That is a great sin of the church. We must become church with a large table that extends God's acceptance, forgiveness and love to each other and to all people.

In our Scripture reading today, the risen Jesus shows Peter – and through him, the Church - how to do that. Here's what Jesus says: "*Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.*"

They are all around us– Jesus' sheep - people who make terrible choices and cannot move past their failures – people who are running out of time in this life and see no hope for the future. Some of those sheep are members of your family. Some of those lambs are around us in Wilson's Mills, or Clayton, or Smithfield. Some of those people are right here in our church.

Whether they realize it or not, they are hungry for what only God can give. Some of those people are folks who life has beaten up on pretty badly. Whether by their own decisions or by some quirk of circumstance, they are unable to provide even the basic needs of their lives – food, housing, health care. You don't have to look very far before you see people who've run out of steam – you'll see them on your drive home. And here's what Jesus says to us: "*Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.*"

Others are people who look successful on the outside, but are poor on the inside. They've staked their lives on false values, and don't even know it. For some, it's not until the career is over, or the illness comes, or the end of life approaches that we realize how empty we really are. And here's what Jesus says to us: "*Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.*"

And, of course, there are those who've been abused by bad religion. People who think God could never love them. People who, too many times, have been told they're going to hell, and the Church has slammed shut the door of grace. Here's what Jesus says to us: "*Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.*" The primary work of the Christian Church – of you and me – is to form ourselves into a living body of people who feed and tend.

Think we can do that? It was, you know, a bunch of ordinary fishermen who changed the course of history. It was a group of powerless women who brought the news of resurrection to the world. The Church was built out of the lives of lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners – it was formed out of the experience of ordinary people like you and me who found in God the resources they needed for enlarging the table. And now, in our day, God is asking if we are willing to become the Church again. The Church is not for us. The Church is *us*... FOR THEM! "*Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep.*" That's our calling. Who can you feed and tend to this week? How can we as the body stretch our table out our doors? The world needs us, and God is counting on us. Let us not go down in history as the church that dropped the ball.