

“Oops: No Fishing” March 9, 2008

I heard about a six-year-old who was using one of those super adhesive glues to put together a model airplane he was building. In less than a minute's time, he had managed to get his right index finger stuck firmly to the shiny wing of his model plane. He tugged and pulled, and waved his hand around frantically, trying to get loose, but nothing worked. Finally his mother found some solvent that did the trick and ended the crisis.

It sounds as though Peter in today's Bible passage, could use a little of that solvent. This is a story that you may know about one of the members of the inner circle of Jesus who had vowed to be a loyal and steadfast friend. No matter what Jesus faced, he swore that he would be right by his side, defending him, helping him deal with whatever came. But then, Jesus was arrested, and our Bible passage tells us how Peter reacted then. It tells this story:

Peter followed, but at a safe distance. In the middle of the courtyard some people had started a fire and were sitting around it, trying to keep warm. One of the serving maids sitting at the fire noticed him, then took a second look and said, “This man was with him!”

He denied it, “Woman, I don't even know him.”

A short time later, someone else noticed him and said, “You're one of them.”

But Peter denied it: “Man, I am not.”

About an hour later, someone else spoke up, really adamant, “he's got to have been with him! He's got Galilean written all over him.”

Peter said, “Man, I don't know what you're talking about.” At that very moment, the last word hardly off his lips, a rooster crowed. Just then, the Master turned and looked at Peter. Peter remembered what the Master had said to him: “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” He went out and cried and cried and cried.”

Talk about failure! Talk about messing up! I've always pictured Peter as sort of a big guy, pretty boastful and rambunctious. I've always seen him as someone who wasn't able to really see the bigger picture, the lay of the land, and who thought things were always going to go along just fine. I doubt it occurred to him that the person he so admired would wind up in a heap of trouble, and I think he was convinced that, if such a far-fetched thing ever happened, he would step up to the occasion.

But that isn't what happened. The worst case scenario was unfolding, and Peter folded. Initially, when they came to arrest Jesus, we're told that Peter drew his sword to protect him, but Jesus stopped him in his tracks. Then we find Peter slinking away, trying to hide in the darkness of the night, on the sidelines trying to get an idea of what was going on. But when others began to recognize him and accuse him of being with Jesus, he did what most of us would probably do, he denied it. He wanted to save his own skin; the heck with Jesus!

Now I doubt that most of us have been in the life or death type of situation in which Peter was, but I wonder if any of us can identify with him. When things get a little too close for comfort, are we able to remain loyal to our friend. Could we say “yes, I'm one of his followers” when we don't know what the repercussions will be? My guess is that most of us would act in ways not all that different from Peter. We'd let our friend down, and we would disappoint our friend in the process and disappoint ourselves as we reflect on what we've done. That seems to be the human condition.

We seem to need what the little boy with his finger glued to the airplane wing needed, and what Peter needed—we need some sort of magic solvent to unglue ourselves from our past mistakes, regrets and failures. When we say things that hurt others, when we fail to do what we promise to do, when we gossip or divulge secrets, we are in need of a magic solvent to help us let go. In my view, forgiveness is that kind of solvent; it is what we need.

You see, you and I are not perfect, and most of us are far from it! On a daily basis, we make mistakes by either doing something we wish we hadn't, or by failing to do something that's we wish we had, and sometimes we're not even aware of it! We make a mess of our relationships, and we're hurtful to those we profess to love. We need forgiveness to wipe the slate clean, to give us a second chance and a fresh start.

What do I mean by forgiveness? Someone has said that forgiveness is like a cancelled note, torn in two and burned up, so that it can never be used against us. Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of the Holocaust, said forgiveness is like God casting our failures, mistakes and shortcomings into the depths of the ocean, and then placing a sign there that says, “No fishing.”

The remarkable thing is that, when we are truly sorry, and when we ask God for forgiveness for our faults and failures, God forgives and really does plant a “no fishing” sign there. I'm convinced, in God's eyes, it's over and done.

The problem is that's not always the case in our own hearts. Many times we play our mistakes over and over again, never daring to bury them. Often we can let go of the pain and forgive others more easily than we can begin to forgive ourselves. But, you see, forgiveness is the full deal: it means asking and receiving forgiveness from God, asking and receiving forgiveness from those we've hurt, and being able to forgive ourselves. It's a long process and probably a never-ending one, but it's essential if we want to live a life that is whole and full.

Peter experienced that remarkable forgiveness from Jesus. In John's gospel, we read that when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death, Peter experienced Jesus asking him three times, “Do you love me?” and then saying to him, “Look after my sheep.” *The Bible for Children* tells what happened this way:

“Peter was hurt when Jesus asked him the third time. “Lord, you know everything; surely you know that I love you!”

There were tears in his eyes and falling down his rough cheeks, because even as he answered for the third time he could hear the rooster crowing in his mind, echoing, screeching. He remembered, with terrible regret, how he had denied knowing Jesus three times.

Now he had been given the chance to say three times, "I love you."

Jesus smiled, and put both hands on Peter's shoulders. He looked deep into the fisherman's eyes as he said, "Feed my sheep!"—meaning to look after those who would yet come to follow Jesus.

Then we read, "On that bright dawn beside Lake Galilee, Peter took courage. He knew he was forgiven and loved and ready to be a leader of the followers of Jesus."

My friends, that same gift of forgiveness is right here, right now. If we are truly sorry, and honestly and openly ask for forgiveness, we will receive it. That's God's promise; that's what Jesus demonstrated in living his life. That's what we can experience this morning, if we are ready to do so.