

40 Days of Prayer, "The Denial", Mark 14:66-72, 3/26/23

Think of a time when you have really blown it, you just want to crawl into bed and pull the covers over you and not come out...while waiting tables at the Olive Garden, I dropped a large plate off the back of my tray onto an elderly gentleman's head and the sauce went all over him. Maybe one more... when performing my 3rd wedding ceremony, I called the bride by the wrong name, the name of his ex-girlfriend. Now as cringy as those things are, I knew I would bounce back from those mistakes. But has there ever been a time in your life when you blew it so bad you thought you would never recover? A young man I was discipling who worked at the Pentagon, and one day absent minded brought his firearm with him as he was entering the security checkpoint at the Pentagon, a mistake that could have not only have ended his career, but that could get him a criminal charge, and most certainly would go in his permanent file. That's an innocent mistake...but what about a colossal more failure? One of our closest friends and the worship leader at our former church was having two-year affair and was caught, lost her job, shamed herself and our church reputation, and put her and her husband on the brink of divorce, wow.

Some of us can relate to these colossal failures, but then there are the everyday, nagging dysfunctions and hangups that make us feel like failures: another D on the math test, another pile of laundry that we didn't get to this week, another late-night raiding of the pantry for snacks, another list of things you need to apologize to your spouse for from the argument last night... I'm sharing all this because this is real life, living a world that is broken and our struggle with sin. Now we put on our nice clothes, and pasted on our nice face and come to church and when someone asks us how we are doing we say, "I'm blessed!" But underneath that, I suspect some of us think we have a permanent sign flashing above our heads, "Failure." I can relate to the shame and feelings of inadequacy and worthless at times in my life too.

Whether it is colossal failures from our past, the nagging failures of everyday life, or the whispers in our ear from our own negative self-talk, I want you to know that there is good news for you today. See I don't believe that failure ruins anyone's life, it's the failure to fail forward that ruins your life, that drags down into a spiral of hopelessness, or self-medication, or denial. It's the failure to fail forward that keeps some of you on the bench instead of using your gifts to serve the Lord on the field. See there is a way to fail forward and this is exactly the good news we are going to see in our text today in Mark 14:66-72. And it's not the power of positive thinking of Tony Robbins, it's not something you can get from mindfulness exercises with your yoga instructor. What we are talking about today can transform you in a real, personal and supernatural way.

This transforming truth about failing forward comes to us from the life of the Apostle Peter. Peter is synonymous with colossal failure isn't he? Here we are 2000 years later and we are still talking about his colossal failure. In fact I haven't even said what it is and most of you all already know. Peter's Denial of Jesus. [Sermon Title Slide] Let's get the setting here. Remember last week, Pastor Todd preached on Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and remember we read that everyone abandoned Jesus as he was led away by the chief priests for the beginning

of his trials. ⁵³ *They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together.*

⁵⁴ *Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.* For all the things that Peter is going to get wrong in this story today, here's one thing he gets right. Notice, he's the only disciple to follow Jesus, albeit at a distance but he's still following just like he swore he would to Jesus so boldly remember? "Jesus, even when all the others fall away, I will never abandon you." And so far he's doing just that... We've heard the saying pride comes before the fall? ⁶⁶ *While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by.*

⁶⁷ *When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said.*

⁶⁸ *But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.* Now it was no surprise that she was able to identify him. For one, when Jesus came into Jerusalem he caused such a commotion that everyone in the city had either seen or heard about it, and so this girl could have easily recognized a member of his entourage. But as we see in verse 70, they knew he was a Galilean like Jesus. How? Well, I grew up in the Schuylkill County PA, known affectionally as the Skook. People from the Skook had a certain way of talking, certain words and an accent that was a dead giveaway...ain't at the end of a sentence... "Gone down to the river, ain't?" Means, "Would you like to go down to the river with me?" My mom worked hard on us to make sure we didn't pick up those sayings. Well there was something about the way the Galileans talked, or dressed, something that made it easily identifiable. Peter wasn't fooling anyone.

And as bold as Peter was just hours before declaring that he would be by Jesus' side no matter what, suddenly it is a servant girl, not a centurion, not a high priest, who has Peter flustered. "Nazarene Jesus? Never heard of him. No idea what you are talking about." He thinks he's off the hook as he walks out to the entryway but this servant girl won't drop it. ⁶⁹ *When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them."*

⁷⁰ *Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean."*

⁷¹ *He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."* Instead of owning up to the denial, Peter double and triples down, digs his hole of failure deeper and deeper. Mark says that he "called down curses and swore to them." In Jesus' day, this would have been the most powerful way to make an oath. It would be like saying, "May God strike me down." Just hours before Peter swore to Jesus I'll never abandon you, and now Peter is swears he never heard of him.

⁷² *Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke*

down and wept. Luke's gospel tells us just as this happened, Jesus from the 2nd floor who is being unjustly accused and beaten, looked Peter in the eyes. Can you imagine the weight of failure that Peter must have felt at that moment as he looked into the pure, innocent and loving eyes of Jesus, the one he denied, cursed and abandoned? You can just feel the cloud of shame coving him.

[Blank Slide] What a fall from grace! I mean, how do you come back from something like that? In Peter's shame and failure he must have thought, I've blown it, and it's over for me. His three years of following Jesus, of miracles, of being part of this movement of the Messiah? Down the drain. And in any normal circumstance, it would have been over...especially in the cancel culture we find ourselves in today. If you messed up this bad with your boss, you are fired and good luck finding another job as new spreads of your disloyalty. Imagine I was caught on camera denying that I'm a Christian and saying I'm not the Pastor here... and it got put on YouTube for you all to see, I'm under no illusion- I would be fired and chances are I'm not getting another job in church ministry.

And yet, somehow, on the brink of ruin, beyond all hope, just weeks later what do we find to our shock, it is this same Peter in Acts 2 preaching boldly to thousands of people right here in Jerusalem the gospel of Jesus, calling them to repent and believe. And 3k people come to faith that day. It is this same lying, denying, failure that is Peter who becomes the first leader of the church. Do you find that shocking? You would think, go away for a year or two, go to therapy, change your name, find a new career and try to start over.

How can this be? The reason is because something life-transforming happened to Peter between Mark 14 and Acts 2 that enabled him to fail forward. John 21. After Good Friday when Jesus was crucified, after Easter Sunday when he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, we see Peter goes back to fishing his old profession before he was a disciple, and sadly John tells us he was even failing at that, because he was catching nothing. And he hears a voice on the shore call to him and this voice tells Peter and the disciples to cast the nets to the other side, and suddenly there are too many fish to even haul in and suddenly he realizes that this voice is none other than Jesus the Nazarene, whom he denied even knowing to a servant girl just days before. Jesus came to find Peter...and this is the original "come to Jesus" moment, they have a fireside chat after eating some fish... ¹⁵ *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."* ¹⁶ *Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."* ¹⁷ *The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

What is going on here? Jesus isn't struggling with short-term memory loss repeating himself, this is intentional. Who claimed that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples? Peter. How many times did Peter deny Jesus? 3x. And how many times did Jesus ask him to reconfirm his love and to feed his sheep? 3x. Jesus is forgiving, rebuilding, restoring Peter's worth and calling.

Jesus is plunging him deep into his mercy and grace. Jesus is healing Peter's wounds of shame and guilt by the power of his restoring, unconditional love. And with a restoring, unconditional love like that, Peter was able to own his past colossal failures, even knowing he would fail in other ways again, and yet fail forward to become the great servant to the church and bold force for the Gospel in the first century. Peter's failure as bad as it was, didn't define him, it marked him but it didn't define him. What defined him was the restoring, unconditional love of Jesus.

Friends, you and I are going to fail. We aren't always going to live up to the standards of God let alone our own standards. And some of us have had colossal failures in our lives. And some of you have benched yourself just like Peter did. Some of you have gone back to fishing, you've gone back to our old life out of a sense of hopelessness. Some of you have allowed failures to define you. And the reason that happens is because you have fallen into the failure trap. When you build your identity, your value and self-worth, on your performance. And when you build your identity on your performance you will inevitably be on a rollercoaster of ego and anxiety, even when you are doing well, and self-pitying, depressing lows when you fail to live up to God's standards, or your own or your spouses, or parents or friends or your boss' standards, whatever you are using to measure your performance. Friends, I have experience on this rollercoaster, front cart...I went through a season of pastoral ministry. I was planting a church when I went through the painful realization that my identity was built on my performance. I was living and dying on every Sunday's attendance numbers...if they were going up, my ego went up with it, but then was filled with anxiety what if they go back down? and if they were going down, I was miserable, having a pity party for myself, feeling like a failure, questioning my calling. Even though there were some amazing transformations happening in the lives of that little church, my ego and identity, my worth were built on the wrong things. Friends, you would not have wanted me as your pastor in those days because they ministry was just as much about me as it was anyone else. I had to have a come to Jesus moment, several actually, like Peter did. How do we get out of the failure trap to fail forward like Peter?

In order to fail forward in a way that transforms us: Build an identity that is not based on your own performance but is based on God's restoring, unconditional love for you in Jesus Christ. And in Jesus Christ is the only location in the universe where God can restore and love you unconditionally. Because, while God loves us, he is also a holy and just God. Our failure and sin prevents a holy and just God from restoring us to his love until our sin and failure is dealt with permanently. And this is why Jesus came- to deal with our sin and failure by becoming our substitute on the cross, making the way for us to be restored to God's unconditional love. This is why Paul says in Romans 8:38-39 that he is convinced that nothing can separate him from the love of God...not even his greatest and most colossal failures.

This is what Peter began to rebuild his identity and his self-worth on at that fireside chat with Jesus that enabled him to fail forward. And it's what God had to do with me. And through that season of feeling like a failure Jesus came looking for me and I heard the whisper of Jesus "Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Build your identity on me and my restoring, unconditional love." And when you rebuild your identity on his love, the whispers of failure begin to be drowned out. Your successes don't become about your ego, and your failures aren't the end of you.

And here's what Peter came to realize and what I came to realize as well, it's only when you've been broken by your failures, and realized that even then God loves you in Christ and that nothing can change that, and your identity is firmly built on the restoring, unconditional love of Jesus, it's only then that you can truly be free to be useful in Christ's kingdom, only then are you free to love and serve other people. Because if your identity is still built on your performance, if your identity is still built on what someone else thinks of you, or your status, or your numbers...you can't truly love and serve other people...you can only use people. You use people to get success, to build your ego, your worth, your value. And you certainly won't love them enough to confront them with truth, or you certainly won't make decisions that they won't like...because if your ego is tied to them, then you will only look to appease them. And if they leave you, or no longer interested being in a relationship with you, you will be devastated and you will be back in the failure trap.

But when you build your identity on the restoring, unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ, you are free to love and serve people, not for what they can do for your ego, not what they can do to make you feel important or successful or worthy, but just because they are made in the image of God and you love them and are called to serve them. And you are free to confront them- because if they reject you, you will be grieved, but not devastated. After all, if you are secure in the only unconditional love and acceptance of the only being in the universe whose opinion ultimately matters... why worry about what one person thinks?

What are you building your identity on? Your performance (or failures)? Or the restoring, unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ? Some of you have permanently benched yourselves because your failures have not only marked you, but they have defined you. Some of you are stuck in the whispers of the enemy telling you that you are a failure and God can't use you. But just like Jesus pursued Peter, just like Jesus pursued me, he's pursuing you. And he wants to have a fireside chat with you and rebuild your identity on his love.