

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Pete's Bait & Tackle

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Fred Snodgrass made one mistake and the world never let him forget it.

In the 1912 World Series between the New York Giants against the Boston Red Socks, in the tenth inning of this tie game, a fly ball landed in Snodgrass' mitt. He dropped it. The Red Sox won the series, and the error stuck with Snodgrass.

Despite all his accomplishments and being given a raise to return to the team, sixty-two years later, in 1974, his *New York Times* obituary read: "Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead; Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly."¹

That's the way we might have remembered the apostle, Peter: "Simon Peter, Fisherman; Denied His Lord in 33 AD" without this one last story in the Gospel of John.

Dear God, to whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. In the ordinariness of life, we gather in your sanctuary, some with faith and others who doubt, some with regrets, some seeking to know how to get up one more day. Speak to us of eternal things. Stir our hearts and souls to believe, so that in believing we may turn our lives to be witnesses of your love. Amen.

Let's imagine this fisherman.

Hard labor in the noonday sun leathered the skin on the back of his neck and lined his face. Hauling nets weighed down with

¹"Fred Snodgrass," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Snodgrass

fish or digging with long oars through deep waters gave him beefy, Popeye-the-sailorman-like forearms. When not trolling for bait, he had tedious, mind-numbing work to mend nets.

The man has fished his whole life alongside and against others. He competed to find the better spots and get the best price for his catch. It was the nature of the trade; some people were friends, and all were competitors. Sound familiar?

Simon, son of John was his formal name. Likely, only his mother called him by the full name, when she was angry. In the first chapter of John's gospel, his brother, Andrew, introduced him to Jesus by telling him, "This is our savior." Simon received a new name, Cephas, or Peter, meaning "the rock." But Simon Peter or Peter seems rather formal for this fisherman; let's just call him "Pete."

He left it all to follow this man in Galilee.

Pete drank deeply of the "good" wine Jesus created from common water at a wedding in Cana.

From a few crusts and fish morsels that he thought not fit to serve, he handed out fish sandwiches to 5,000. Pete could not explain this abundance or any of the other signs. For the first time in his life, he was not just going through the motions of faith, Pete believed, when Jesus told him that God cared about his life.

He should have known; good things don't last long. Local leaders accuse his itinerant minister of lying like a politician, when Jesus said, "I am the bread of heaven." In a circular and hard to follow way, Jesus told them if you believed, you were to eat his flesh and drink from his cup.

All the talk of losing your life and eating Jesus' flesh offended most of the crowd. Many decided the party was over and left. Maybe you know some fair weathered friends who are not reliable? Jesus turned to Pete, what about you? This man of few words said one of my favorite verses in all of scripture; "where else can I go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:68)." Maybe he was the sturdy, rock-solid type?

Just when you think he might grow to become one of the heroes, he blows it. On the night they gathered in an upper room for a meal, the air thick with tension, before he stoops to the floor, like a slave, to wash everyone's feet, Jesus commands them to "love each other."

Pete steps back. It was too intimate. Confused of what's going on, he counters with "no, let me wash your feet". Pete flailed around, unable to accept Jesus' tenderness. Everyone sensed it, almost pitied him.

It gets worse. After Jesus offers to lay down his life for them, Pete interrupted, claiming he will follow him no matter what and that he too would lay down his life. Knowing what will happen, Jesus interrupts him before he digs a deeper hole by

saying “no, before daybreak you will turn your back, you will deny me three times.”

That night, maybe to win him back, when confronted by soldiers in riot gear, he pulled his sword and sliced off the ear of one of the soldier’s slaves.

It backfired and he lost the fight with Jesus who told him to put away his sword, “this is not the way.” Against the embers of a fire in the deep of that night, three times Pete denied having any part of Jesus. The dense rock threw away everything and left.

He heard that Jesus died by a crucifixion designed for the lowest class criminals.

His shame was heavier than anything he had known. But which was worse; denying Jesus or being foolish enough to have believed in him? Sleepless nights turned into a third morning. At daybreak, one of the women, said the tomb was empty. Racing against another disciple and arguing with himself – Pete knew that stone could not have moved – and yet, maybe. He walked in the empty tomb and left again.

Pete said nothing.

Later, with nail holes in his hands and the flesh of his side torn open, Jesus appeared. It was unbelievable, and yet, it was all true.

All of what Pete publicly doubted was true. He was not too popular for how he had behaved, so just a few returned with him to the sea.

They launched the boat but caught nothing. Calling it a night, as they rowed ashore, they saw a figure in the breaking dawn. This man's voice sounded familiar, "what'd ya get?" With sheer exhaustion and frustration, "nothing" they replied. When the man told them to just toss their net to the other side, they did, landing a school of fish, so massive; it took all their strength.

Of course, Pete knew it was Jesus and he had to face up to what he had done. How do you mend a relationship with someone you abandoned at a time he needed you most?

Listen for God's living word as we overhear Jesus' conversation with Pete from the 21st chapter of John. I'll begin at verse nine.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord.

Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. ...After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Who hasn't denied and betrayed and disappointed? Who hasn't at some point along the way failed to live up to the hopes and expectations of others or yourself? Who hasn't failed to love and forgive and be generous and think of something and someone other than yourself? Large or small, terrible or trivial, you can carry that load around until it wears you down, paralyzes you.

Whether you call it forgiveness or grace, Christ gave Pete a new lease on life. And learning all Christ wanted was his love meant he did not need to carry the shame of how he behaved. In his gut, he finally grasped those words from Christ, "For God so loved the world, God sent a son, that all who believed will have life."

Folks wondered how he would live into this promise. Some had a silver-tongued gift for preaching. Others the wanderlust for traveling far, and others were diplomats. Each of the disciples had a gift to pursue.

Pete could work harder and longer than anyone else. He could fight, if necessary, to protect his own. He had been good at those when he worked for someone else, competing with everyone else. Pete went back to fishing and tried it in a new way: he pledged his life to love Christ. At first, he was clumsy and humbled. As ambiguous or lofty as that sounds, to love Christ, in reality it became more obvious and easier as he began each day with that pledge.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Pete shared Jesus' words of eternal life in his own way. What he lacked in eloquence he made up for in being so approachable. He surprised himself at being able to "unfold the scriptures." People came to believe for themselves.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. In the beginning it was hard because he thought he needed to love the people first. When he focused on loving Christ, he found in himself the courage to widen the circle by caring for those long-neglected.

Somedays he even got on his hands and knees to do the humbling work of serving, washing feet, and tending those kids Jesus always wanted around.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. In small and consistent ways, Pete kept the course and steered a ship – the church – into the new world.

Whenever Jesus shows up, abundance flows. Wine. Words. Fish. Grace.

At Pete's Bait & Tackle, he taught people how to fish together, how to eat together, how to forgive, and be forgiven. On the side, he served fish sandwiches and a carafe of wine that some said was the finest available in Galilee. Every time he served simple meals and broke the bread, he remembered, and told the story about Jesus, not with sorrow, but joy. He invited others to know the risen Christ, so they would also believe, and let their lives be made new by this otherworldly, but very real grace.



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