



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 24, 2013

“New Birth”

(I Peter 1:3-5)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, You reign among us by the preaching of Your cross. Forgive Your people their offenses that we, being governed by Your bountiful goodness, may enter at last into Your eternal paradise; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Do you know the card game called “Hearts?” The objective is to get as few hearts as possible. They’re like demerit points. It’s a spirited, competitive game. But the thing about this game is that you can be doing really well for most of the evening. You carefully and deliberately play your cards, and it all works according to plan. You take the lead and start yuckin’ it up with the older brothers, but then, suddenly, tragically, it can all come crashing down in spectacular fashion. You harvest hearts like a combine harvests corn. And the older brothers, full of malice and envy, they just love it when you crash and burn. And the thing is, in the game of Hearts, there’s really no recovering from that. Nothing you do the rest of the evening will change the fact that you really blew it on that one hand. There’s no scrubbing up the score sheet. There’s no asking the older brothers for a clergy discount: that’s just inviting abuse. That one hand ruined you. It makes you want to throw in the cards and quietly excuse yourself for the evening, but that doesn’t go over well either.

It’s sort of like dieting. You’re eating right, exercising, but then Thanksgiving weekend rolls around. It disrupts your routine. The hors d’oeuvres alone, (those little bacon wrapped wieners in a BBQ sauce that Aunt Arlyss brings) they completely derail you. After a handful of those, any thoughts of healthy eating for the rest of the holiday season are laid aside, and it can take a very long time to recover.

If you’re a student in school, you can be doing well, getting good grades. But then, without much thought one day, you ask a really dumb and embarrassing question. Your classmates look at you with the expression “Really?”

It makes you want to go home and lock yourself in your bedroom and not come out.

I wonder if the disciple Peter ever felt that way . . . like giving up as a disciple, throwing in the cards, calling it quits. He had made so many big, spectacular blunders. Remember the time when Jesus asked, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples hem and haw and kick at the dirt. They’re reluctant to commit. “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” There are all kinds of half baked theories out there. “But what about you” Jesus asks, who do you say that I am?” Peter jumps in with both feet and he’s spot on, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” “Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah!” Jesus says

But then Jesus starts talking again about dying on a cross, and Peter, thinking he’s on a roll, blurts out, “This will never happen to you!” the unspoken words being “not so long as I’m with you.” Peter’s expecting to hear more praise for his fierce loyalty, but instead Jesus turns on him. “Get behind me Satan!” Peter was creating a gap between Jesus and the cross. He was divorcing the two, and whenever we do that, we’re doing the devil’s work, for the cross is why he came.

Those words surely hurt Peter. We know how words can hurt, and if we had been on the receiving end of such harshness many of us would have left Jesus with a huff and a puff. “Fine! Have it your way!” But you got to hand it to Peter. He hangs in there. He swallows down the lump in his throat, and the bitter humiliation, and he continues to follow Jesus.

Then there was that night Jesus was arrested. Jesus told the twelve, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me.” Peter is shocked. He knows he would never do that! So he puffs out his chest and announces, “Even if all [these guys] fall away on account of you, I never will” (Mt. 26:33). “I am ready to go even to the death with you” (Lk. 22:33). Can you see how the eleven look at Peter? Can you see how incensed and disgusted they are? The Lord also turns on Peter, “I tell you Peter, before the rooster

crows *today*, three times you will deny me.” And it plays out just that way. That evening, three times Peter has opportunity to confess Jesus. Three times Peter denies even knowing Jesus. The rooster crows and Peter weeps.

A little while later, Pilate caves to the tyranny of the crowd. Jesus is crucified. A few hours later he dies and is hastily buried.

On the third day, at sunrise, some women go out to tend to the body. They come back to the disciples shaken and spooked. They report actually having seen an angel. He told them not to be afraid. He told them that Jesus has risen. And then they actually saw Jesus and he told them they should all make their way to Galilee and he would meet them there (Mt. 28:10).

It’s only a guess, but I’m thinking Peter isn’t so sure he wants to see Jesus again. Remember, he had failed the Lord in spectacular fashion. With peacock feathers aplomb for all to see he had announced he would sooner die with Jesus. But at the first sign of trouble, he wasn’t willing even to acknowledge knowing Jesus. He is so ashamed and stands utterly humiliated before the others. Their record isn’t pristine either, but at least they didn’t crash and burn like Peter did. They probably took some comfort in that and maybe even found ways to remind Peter of it. In any event, Peter’s a flop as a disciple. Many mistakes you can recover from; others, not so much. As they say, “Put a fork in him; he’s done.”

Peter had been playing his cards really well for the most part. There were hiccups along the way for sure, but nothing from which he couldn’t recover. Then, that one hand came along and it was disastrous. It ruined him. No matter what he does on the remaining hands, the remaining years of his life, he’ll never recover. He cannot. It’s there on the score sheet for all to see and there’s no changing that. It’s a part of who he is and he loathes that part of who he is. And it makes him want to curl up and die.

Have you ever felt like this? Have you ever felt like you were doing ok, not perfect by any means, but pretty good, and then somehow you blew it? Maybe you were

caught stealing something small from work, but your boss found out. Maybe you had too much to drink one night and did something really stupid, and those who were there will never forget it. Or, in a careless moment, you slandered a good friend and he learned of it. Maybe your spouse discovered you on a website you shouldn't be on. There's no going back and changing things, is there? It's part of history now, part of **your** history. Though you loathe it, it's part of who you are. It's on the score sheet, and it feels like the whole game is blown. No matter how well you play the rest of the hands, it won't change what happened. And though God may forgive and forget in a perfect way, it's a different story with people. They will remember.

In cards, as in life, it doesn't take much to have a disastrous hand. I have in my office a little comic strip. It shows two guys in a sparse prison cell. And the one says to the other, "All I did was shift one lousy decimal point." It really doesn't take much to lose work and friends and family and reputation. One little decimal point can do the job.

As instructed by the risen Lord, Peter and the other disciples go to Galilee to wait for him there. There's lots of nervous energy. Trying to keep themselves busy and distracted, one night they decide to go out fishing. They've been casting their nets all night but don't have single fish to show for it. A stranger appears on the shoreline. It's still dark; they don't know it's Jesus. "Friends, haven't you any fish?" he shouts. I sense Jesus is enjoying the moment, teasing them a little. "No!" they shout back, and maybe, "Now bug off!" But Jesus calls back, "Cast your nets on the other side." If only to get rid of this guy they do so, and right there, right there is a whole school of fish. There's a loud fuss as the disciples struggle to haul in that hefty catch. I picture Jesus laughing at it. The little miracle helps Peter connect the dots. "It's the Lord!" Any former hesitation vanishes. Peter knows Jesus isn't there for vengeance. In fact, he can see Jesus has prepared a bed of hot coals and it's not for some sort of cruel punishment. It's for the fish they just caught!

The disciples gather round. I doubt much of

anything is said. Jesus has already said a lot simply by preparing that meal for them. Still, things aren't quite right with Peter. Not everything has been said that needs to be said. Jesus breaks the silence. "Peter, do you love me." "Yes, Lord" Peter says, "you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs" Jesus says. A second time Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Take care of my sheep." Yet a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter is hurt. "Lord" he says, "you know all things. You know that I love you." Jesus said "Feed my sheep." And then, a few verses later: "Follow me!" And with that Peter is reinstated.

Three times Jesus asks. Three times Peter confesses his love for Jesus, to account for the other three times of denial. Jesus covers over a multitude of sins with his love.

A part of Peter had wanted to throw in the cards and give up, maybe even do the Judas thing. But Jesus loves Peter and has plans for him. In spite of all Peter's faults, the command is "Follow me!" Peter does that for the rest of his days. He becomes one of the most important leaders of the Early Church. God even inspires him to write two books of the Bible.

At the end, Peter was martyred for the faith, probably in Rome. They crucified Peter, just as Jesus had intimated they would. Early tradition has it Peter insisted on being crucified upside down, this out of respect to his Lord. He felt unworthy of being crucified in the same way Jesus was. In other words, Peter didn't throw in the cards. He didn't give up. He didn't try to start a new life elsewhere. He didn't flee from the shame. Instead, he fled to the Lord, and the Lord forgave him. And the Lord reinstated him and loved him back into life.

There are times for all of us when we have failed, miserably, spectacularly, publicly. When that happens, a part of you just wants to give up, or try to hide from the shame and the humiliation and maybe even flee from the Lord because you half suspect he might have it in for you. But the answer is not in giving up. The answer is not in minimalizing the sin. And the answer is not in fight or flight. The answer is

not in trying to start a new life for yourself somewhere else. The answer is certainly not in waiting for death. The answer is in the love and grace and forgiveness of our Savior Jesus.

Numerous times the Bible reminds us God “is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ex. 34:7). That word “abounding” makes me think of those red gravity boxes out in the fields right now, filled to the brim with golden corn. Such is God’s love for you. God is abounding, (filled to the top edges) in steadfast love for you. God has reconciled you to himself through his Son Jesus. God is not going to lay waste to you because that would lay waste to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When publicly shamed, you don’t have to try to give yourself a new start. In Holy Baptism, you have a God who blesses you with a new start. Not just once, but daily a new man emerges. Romans 6:4, “We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too may live a new life.”

Peter in our Epistle lesson, the same Peter who denied Christ now writes, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth.” Did you hear it? If anyone would know about this it would be Peter! So I’ll read it again: “In his great mercy he has given us new birth.” God’s forgiveness is so thorough, that, from His perspective at least, it’s as if you have a brand new life.

Live it out in renewed obedience to him. That’s part of what it means to “Follow me!” Live it out in obedience. Live it out also in gratitude and joy.

Every individual has chapters in their history they deeply regret, and of which they are deeply ashamed. But the Good News is God blots out all our iniquities with his blood. Though you may have a really bad chapter as part of your history, you are God’s child, washed, cleansed, forgiven and made new. Each day is a new day in Christ. The old is gone. The new has come. Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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