A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Redemption’s Backstory*”

Acts 9, John 21

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Our New Testament readings give us two favorite stories on one Sunday. In John 21, we see Jesus appearing to the disciples by the sea shore. There, he poignantly confronts his old friend who had denied him three times at his darkest hour. Do you love me? He asks Peter, three times. You know I love you. In Acts 9, we see Jesus, or really, we hear Jesus calling to Saul on the road that leads to Damascus. Saul, more commonly known to us as Paul, is heading there to arrest Christians, breathing threats and murder against them. Somewhere on that long and dusty road, a bright light appears, Saul is struck blind, and hears a voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

Peter, do you love me?

Saul, struck blind.

These are but the beginnings of redemption stories, two of the best that ever were. These two become the two prominent leaders of the church, remembered still today as saints, the Rock on which Jesus built his church and the Apostle to the Gentiles.

We still remember these two. In July, a group of us are headed to Rome. On our first full day, we will go to the world’s largest church called St. Peter’s Basilica. The altar is taller than our sanctuary. The altar table sits directly over the bones of Peter buried deep beneath.

In the afternoon of the same day, we will make our way to another side of the city to another historic church, St. Paul’s Outside the Walls. This cathedral is built over the bones of Paul. It’s not a bad way to spend a Monday: in one day, we will connect with not only these two stories, but also Christians who for two millennia have venerated the tombs and memories of these two Apostles of Christ: Peter and Paul, two of the founders of the church, missionaries, martyrs, scoundrels, sinners saved by grace, redeemed by Christ.

We all are. We are all sinners saved by grace if we are anything at all. There’s no other ticket through the front door. There’s no other way into this, but as a sinner saved by grace. They may not build a church with your name on it centuries from now. They may not build you a statue even, or write books about you. They may not write songs about you or read your letters or your tweets. You may not have the courage of Peter or Paul; you may not start churches all over the world; you may not help begin a world-wide movement that would change the world. You may not do any of those things or be any of those things. Or you just might. But you still have something important in common with both Peter and Paul, the most important thing. You are a sinner saved by grace.

Christianity is a redemption story. All of it. Don’t we need that? All of us?

Peter’s story and Paul’s story are two of the most dramatic. Do you remember Peter? He was there when Jesus was arrested. All that long night, he was lurking around while Jesus was being interrogated and abused. A young woman said, I think I know you, you’re one of those. You’re with him. No, I’m not, he said. Can you believe that? No, I’m not. He said it three times that night. I’m not with him. I’m not a part of this. I deny knowing Jesus. Then the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered Jesus had said it would happen just like this. You’ll deny me. And he did.

Peter’s denial was of the kind when we don’t do what we’re supposed to do. When I was younger, we learned that was called a sin of omission. I think people liked categorizing sins back then. Sins of omission: James describes this, actually: whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is a sin (4.17). When you don’t do something you’re supposed to do, you omit doing good. It’s an omission. You leave something out. It’s pretty clear Peter didn’t see any good options that night. If he acknowledged he was one of Jesus’ friends, he could be the next one dragged in front of the crowd. But that still didn’t change what was the right thing to do. His self-preserving calculus probably saved his life, but he would have given it up after that if he could have. What good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul? That must have rung in his ears as he went out alone, weeping.

Saul was on another level, breathing treats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He was a very serious, zealous religious person, hunting down followers of Jesus, rooting them out, and possibly even having them killed for following Jesus.

The stakes were that high for Christians. They still are in many places, let us not forget, where to be a Christian is to risk your life. Saul was hunting them down, not just in Jerusalem where the Jesus movement had caught fire, but now travelling all the way to Damascus to see if he could find more of them. When I was young, I learned that this is called a sin of commission. If a sin of omission is when you don’t do something you should do, a sin of commission is when you do something you shouldn’t. That was what Saul was doing on the road to Damascus when he was confronted in a most mysterious and dramatic way. This confrontation was so dramatic that a Damascus Road Experience is the way people even now talk about when their lives are changed in an instant by Jesus.

Saul’s life was certainly changed. Struck blind for three days, he was led to Damascus where a man named Ananias sought him, laid his hands on him, prayed for him, and welcomed him into the very community he had come to destroy. He came as a hunter. He arrived as a brother. He went from calling Jesus a fraud to proclaiming him as the Son of God. It’s hard to imagine a more dramatic change.

It is one of the great gifts of the biblical witness that two of our most important and celebrated founders were people who were redeemed from their omissions and their commissions, what they should have done but didn’t and what they shouldn’t have done but did. This is important for their own selves and as a sign of what Christianity is all about. Christianity is not a reward given to those for being good; it is a path to holiness that begins wherever you are.

It’s hard to be faithful. We are people who are too often at battle within ourselves to be whole persons wholly in love with Jesus, living holy lives. We have clay feet, we have wandering minds, we have fickle hearts, we have forked tongues, we have distracted minds. We need redemption, if not as dramatically as Peter or Paul, then just as truly.

Are you a person who has denied Christ?

Are you a person who has opposed Christ?

Are you a person who has neglected Christ?

Are you a person who has disregarded Christ?

Are you a person who has failed in your commitment to Christ?

Are you a person who had doubted Christ?

Are you a person who has hurt other people in the name of Christ?

Are you a person who has preserved your own good vs standing up as one of those in Christ?

Not every person is made a Christian by a Damascus Road-like experience, but some are, nor is every person made a Christian by a gut-wrenching “Do you love me?” examination, but some are. People are made into Christians in all kinds of ways. What we all have in common is what we have in common with Peter and Paul and all the others. Christ meets us right where we are and draws us to himself. This is why it is called good news. This is good news indeed.

What these redemption stories teach us is not that every conversion is dramatic, but that our darkest places are redeemable. Consider your worst trait--as if I need to invite you to. Consider your darkest place, the thing about yourself you’re most ashamed of, concerned about, or feel like disqualifies you from God’s love.

What can God do with that part of your life? Truth is, you probably have no idea. You have no idea what God can do with that part of your life. But it’s something good.

It’s something beyond your imagination.

In the redeeming hands of Jesus, the deadest parts of our lives can become alive again and become the instrument in God’s hands for good.

Peter’s cowardice was transformed into courage. Those same lips that denied Jesus proclaimed him boldly to congregations and authorities. Paul’s zealous persecution was transformed into unstoppable enthusiasm to share the gospel all over the world. He who used to hunt Christians became a fisher of people for the gospel. Augustine was a bit of a self-centered thief that Christ transformed into a seeker and teacher of truth. C.S. Lewis was an atheist who argued against Christians until he gave his life to Christ and used his intellect and creativity to inspire generations of believers.

I know a person who was wrapped up only in today, in pleasure; once he gave his life to Christ, his energy is now an infectious delight of God’s immediate presence.

I’ve seen anger transformed into passion.

I’ve seen lust transformed into genuine love.

I’ve seen a person who despised their body transformed into a person whose humility was life-giving not self-destroying.

That part of our lives that is most unlikely to be good in our understanding of our selves is just the part of you God wants the very most.

Peter denied Christ three times. Three times he is asked, “Do you love me?” You know I do. Feed my sheep.

Paul persecuted Christians. Struck blind, he had three days in a tomb of darkness before he was given the gift of sight and a new life and a new mission.

Either of them could have been tossed on the trash heap of failure, betrayal, enemies defeated in the long march of Gospel glory. But God doesn’t work that way. Failure is the prelude to victory. Betrayal is the forerunner to reconciliation. Enemies are friends who don’t know it yet. That part of you that you aren’t so sure is worthy of Christ, that’s the seed of something good yet to grow in you.

I think we’re supposed to offer that part of our lives to Jesus. I think that’s the way it’s supposed to go. We’re supposed to be honest with ourselves and say, Lord, I give you everything, I give you my all. I offer to you the very best I have to offer, the choicest fruit of the garden of my life. You are worthy of that and so much more.

I also give to you this *other* part of me. This part of me I wouldn’t dare bring before you but that Christ died for me and took even this upon himself. I give it all to you. My shame, my guilt, my omissions and commissions. Do with it, do with me all that you will.

I place myself into your nail-pierced hands, hold me.

I lean close into your scarred side, receive me.

I look upon your thorn-crowned brow, know me.

I follow your wounded feet, lead me.

I come to your tomb, knowing there I will not find you, trusting that at your empty tomb you have already sought and found me.

Here I am. Send me.

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