

Second Chances John 21:15-19

What do Tiger Woods, Lindsay Lohan, Michael Vick, Bill O'Reilly, and Amy Winehouse have in common?

They are very public personalities who, for a variety of reasons, define what it means to "fall from grace." How does that happen? And why do we so gleefully revel in these stories? In our scripture reading for today, we have Peter - who having denied Jesus three times – an apparent "fall from grace" –is not met with rebuke but is instead met with grace by the one who defines grace.

Having studied French in high school and having the opportunity to visit France, I was for many years enthralled by those who competed in the Tour de France, one of the most grueling sporting events on the planet. Many of you probably remember Lance Armstrong who won the Tour de France seven consecutive times from 1999 to 2005. Several of those wins came after a battle with testicular cancer. Throughout the years, Armstrong was repeatedly accused of using banned performance-enhancing drugs. Armstrong not only adamantly denied those accusations, but often viciously attacked his accusers.

Until January 17, 2013, when Armstrong appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show and, for the first time, publicly admitted that the accusations about his use of performance-enhancing drugs were true, after all.

The public reaction to Armstrong's admission was often cruel and vindictive. Here are just a few quotes that surfaced in the days following:

- Lance Armstrong says, "I'm a flawed character." That's like the Pacific Ocean saying "I'm a little damp."
- If I saw Lance riding his bike, it would be darn hard not to veer right and take him out.
- Lance may have HAD cancer, but he still IS a cancer.

Now I agree that Armstrong's actions were deplorable. It was disappointing to see someone who was looked up to as a hero fall from grace. But I think even more disappointing is the way in which our culture seems to take such great pleasure in those who fall from the pedestal of public acclaim into the mud puddles of their own failure. From sports heroes to political front-runners to musical superstars, we as a culture love to put down and demonize those who "fall from grace."

But we seem to fail to understand just how damaging that behavior is. This public delight only serves to drive each of us more deeply into shame because, at some level, we all know that we have nowhere to go but into the mud puddles of our own failures. We live in fear that we'll be "found out" and exposed for our own failures and frauds. We'd rather live a lie than admit the truth.

So we desperately avoid the kind of vulnerability and transparency that makes for genuine community and personal wholeness, and choose instead to live in the deadness of our sin, guilt and shame.

I think that's why the story of Peter and Jesus that we heard today is so important for us to hear. In our culture, we bury the shame of our failures, desperately fearing that others will discover the mess of our lives, we constantly hide behind masks because we're afraid we'll wind up verbally skewered like Lance Armstrong.

We need to be reminded that the One we worship knows our failures and doesn't shame us and or delight in our brokenness, but forgives us and restores us, commissions us and sends us into the world, blessing us to be a blessing to others.

That's just what happens to Peter. Peter has come a long way, from simple fisherman to bold disciple. Peter is the first to recognize and publicly proclaim Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, and in response Jesus nicknames him "the Rock." Peter has boldly proclaimed that he will follow Jesus anywhere, even into prison, even to death. When Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter is the only disciple who doesn't abandon Jesus. He follows Jesus to the courtyard of the high priest's home. Peter the faithful. Peter the brave. Peter the bold. Peter on a pedestal....

Until the pressure comes. As Peter huddles around a fire in the courtyard of the high priest's home, three people identify him as one of Jesus' followers. Suddenly Peter the brave is Peter the petrified. Faint with fear, Peter does what comes so naturally to people like us: he lies. He denies ever knowing Jesus, denies his Lord three times. And in that moment, Peter falls from the pedestal to the pit of guilt and shame. Peter the faithful becomes Peter the denier.

Ever been there? I have, many times. I have a vivid memory of an experience in elementary school. I had a classmate who was new to our school and just adopted by a family in our church. He and his younger brother were baptized one Sunday. The next day in school – I can't remember how it even got started – the students started making fun of him on the playground. I didn't stand up for him, or tell them to stop. I remember the hurt look in his eyes. Just thinking about that experience plunges me back into puddles of guilt and shame.

But that's why we need to hear the rest of Peter's story. How does Jesus deal with failures like Peter, and Lance Armstrong, and you and me? He pursues us. Jesus comes to Peter, calls his name, invites him to breakfast and lovingly restores him to wholeness. "Peter, do you love me?" Jesus gives Peter an opportunity to express his love and devotion three times, once for each denial. And then Jesus restores Peter's confidence by giving him a place in the mission: "Feed my sheep."

That's how Jesus deals with failures and frauds and fear-filled disciples like you and me. He will not let us go. He will not let us drown in the mud puddles of our own brokenness. He pursues us. He forgives us and restores us. He makes us whole again. And then he commissions us to get back up and get back to the mission for which we were created and called. The resurrected Jesus moves us from the death of sin and guilt and shame, to new life. By grace we live again. It's a stunningly beautiful thing to behold. It's even more beautiful to experience.

So, how do we live out this good news? How do we live into this new resurrection life that is ours in Christ? Let me suggest two possibilities.

Maybe you're here today, and you've fallen from the pedestal to the puddle. You're drowning in guilt and shame. You know who you are and what you've done, and you pray that no one sitting around you this morning will ever find out, lest they treat you the way we treat Armstrong and others who have fallen hard. If that's you, and you're tired of living in the deadness of sin, I want you to know that the One who forgave and restored Peter is the One who forgives and restores you. Give your pain and your past to God, the One who is making all things new, including you.

Or maybe you're here today and you know someone who has fallen from the pedestal to the puddle, and they don't seem able to get back up. You can see the wasting effects of guilt and shame in their life. Then how about being Christ-in-flesh for them? Pursue them. Invite them out for breakfast. Remind them that the One who made us is making us new in Christ, forgiving and restoring, bring us back to life, setting us back on our feet and sending us back into the world, blessed to be a blessing.

In a culture that seems to take delight in the pain of others, let's be Easter people whose lives point to the One who suffered pain so that our pain might be revealed, the One who was lifted up on a cross so that we who fall daily from the pedestal to the puddles of sin might be lifted up, forgiven and restored to live again. Let's be people who show love, mercy and grace and offer second chances.

Amen

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