Second Chances

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter James
John 21:15-17

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I was a big *Veggie Tales* fan back in the day. *Veggie Tales* are animated Bible stories for children. They feature Larry the Cucumber, Bob the Tomato and a whole host of other salad bowl vegetable characters. *Veggie Tales* released their first full-length feature film on the Jonah story 15 years ago. God directs Jonah to Nineveh to tell people to come back to God. Jonah balks at this assignment. He hops the first ship headed in the opposite direction. The sailors throw him overboard in a storm and a big fish swallows him. In the *Veggie Tales* version of the story, angels visit Jonah in the belly of that fish (some call it a whale) to announce God is giving him a second chance. The angels break out in a rousing chorus about second chances. “If you say you’re sorry for all the stuff you do, know that He is ready for a second chance for you…Our God is a God of second chances.”

The Bible is full of stories about God giving people second chances. God gives Abraham and Moses a second chance. God gives David a do-over in his colossal screw-up with Bathsheba. Jesus gives the thief on the cross a second chance. Peter’s life is a classic second chance redemption story. Earlier in John’s gospel, Peter denies three times in quick succession that he is one of Jesus’ followers. It is a monumental failure, to be sure.

Let me take you back to last Sunday’s story. Following Jesus’ death, the disciples resume their former occupation of
fishing. The risen Jesus calls to his disciples from the shoreline. Peter recognizes the resurrected Jesus and swims to shore. Jesus has breakfast ready and waiting for them. Jesus turns to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (21:15).

Simon, son of John happens to be Peter’s original name. In the beginning of John’s gospel, Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, meaning rock to go with his new identity as his follower (John 1:42). Peter is anything but a rock in John’s gospel. He alternates between rock-solid and unreliable. I suspect Jesus uses Peter’s birth name to accentuate his second chance opportunity.

“These” refers to the other disciples gathered around the charcoal fire for breakfast. Essentially, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these other disciples do?” If we rewind to the Last Supper, Jesus announced that all his disciples would fall away. Peter boasts, “Even if they all fall away, I will not,” (Mark 14:29). Peter’s answer in this story, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” makes no mention of his earlier comparison to the other disciples. His former bravado has all but disappeared. Jesus follows his question with the admonition, “Feed my lambs.”

Jesus asks Peter the same question a second time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (20:16). Peter’s answer is identical, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Again, Jesus commissions him, “Feed my sheep.”
Jesus asks the question a third time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (20:17). It pains Peter to hear this question asked a third time. “Yes, Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep,” Jesus tells him.

Whenever I read this exchange, I think of Fiddler on the Roof. Tevye and his wife Golde are having a conversation about their daughters who have chosen marriage partners based on love instead of relying on their families to choose suitors for them. Suddenly, Tevye breaks out in song, “Do you love me?” His question catches Golde off guard. “I’m your wife, you know.” Tevye is undeterred, “I know, but do you love me?” Golde looks away singing, “For twenty five years, I’ve lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. For twenty-five years, my bed is his. If that’s not love, what is?” “Then you love me?” Tevye asks. “I suppose I do,” Golde answers. “And I suppose I love you too,” Tevye declares.

Some preachers make a big deal out of the words Jesus and Peter use for love in this exchange. While Jesus employs the strongest form of love agapao, Peter uses a relatively weaker verb phileo. I am not inclined to make too much of the distinction since Jesus uses these verbs interchangeably elsewhere in John’s gospel. But I do not want you to miss the point of Jesus’ repeated do you love me questioning. His three questions serve to counterbalance Peter’s earlier threefold denial. Everything comes in threes in this passage. Peter’s three denials lead to Jesus’ three questions. These three questions prompt Peter’s three
confessions that culminate in Jesus’ three commissions to feed his sheep.

Jesus does not operate by a “three strikes and you’re out” approach to following him. He graciously gives Peter a second chance to fulfill what he earlier promised. Peter is now willing to go all the way with Jesus to the cross.

This is the moment when Jesus delivers the sobering news to Peter, “Truly, I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead where you do not want to go” (20:18-19). “Stretch out your hands” is likely a reference to Peter’s death by crucifixion. By the time John writes his gospel in 80-90AD, Peter’s martyrdom has already occurred. Early church sources confirm Peter dies by crucifixion sometime in the 60s AD during one of Nero’s persecutions.

Peter then asks about the fate of John in subsequent verses. Jesus essentially tells him it is none of his business. “You must follow me,” Jesus tells him again. “You” is in emphatic position to put the stress on Peter. This ought to be a lesson whenever we are tempted to compare ourselves to other Christians. Never mind about John. You must follow me. How fitting their dialogue ends with the words “Follow me.”

We have come to the end of our sermon series on John’s gospel. John finally steps out of the story to acknowledge
that he has been selective about which stories to include about Jesus. There is so much more to say about him. John’s closing words attest to his love and admiration for Jesus: “I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that could be written about him” (21:25).

God gives people second chances. I can attest to it. God has given me plenty of mulligans over the years. A mulligan is a golfing expression. If you play a lousy first shot, you can ask your fellow players for a second chance to replay the same shot. A mulligan is a second chance or do-over. It is what the Bible calls grace. God’s mercy and unmerited favor affords us plenty of second chances.

Jesus does not disown Peter. He does not chastise or rebuke him. He restores him to a place of leadership.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let me revisit this theme of second chances in relationship to Mother’s Day, Ignite and our summer sermon series.

First, Mother’s Day. Some of you may be wondering whether I will deliver this entire sermon without once mentioning Mother’s Day. Not on your life! This sermon on second chances has mothers written all over it. Moms who are good at what they do know how to give their children second chances. They know how to set limits for their children and when to cut their kids some slack.

Moms also need to go easy on themselves. God affords conscientious parents plenty of do-over opportunities. Our upwardly mobile metro area puts too much stress on being
super moms and dads. God affords us plenty of second chance opportunities to be good parents for our children.

Second, Ignite. I have laid out our vision for Ignite in previous sermons. Our mission, pure and simple, is to reach more people for Jesus Christ. We need your participation to reach our five million dollar goal. Thus far, we have received 144 pledges totaling three million. Since we have 1200 individuals and families who identify with this church, we have so much unrealized potential in this church. We received one pledge this week from a 10-year-old girl who pledged $120 from her allowance over a three-year period to this mission. If you have not yet pledged and you are someone who believes in our mission, I am talking to you. I am not speaking to the person seated in the pew near you. I am talking to you. We need to hear from you now! Do not wait until celebration Sunday, June 4. If everyone participates, we can reach our goal of sharing the love of Christ with more people. Make your giving a matter of intentional prayer. Ask God to guide you in the gift you can make to further Christ’s kingdom here. It will be the best money you have ever invested. It’s an investment with eternal consequences.

Our third “so-what” relates to our summer sermon series on Go-To Verses. What Bible passages do you go to when your back is against the wall and you need encouragement to keep going? We will be asking you this summer to share with each other your favorite verses and why they have meaning for you.
We as pastors will preach about our favorite Bible passages in sermons this summer. I will launch this series on the second Sunday of June with one of my all-time favorite Bible verses, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). I picked this verse because it all comes down to grace. Peter is not the only one who gets a do-over. We do also!

God offers people second chances. Plenty of second chances! Do not trifle with God’s second chances. There will come a time at the end of your life when the offer runs out. Right now, the offer is still on the table. Some of you right now need a do-over. You messed up. “Lord, I need a second chance.” Take the mulligan. Play the same shot over again. Do it now. Ask the God of second chances to help you begin your life of faith all over again.

Let’s go back to the *Veggie Tales* song: “If you say you’re sorry for all the stuff you do, we know He will be ready with a second chance for you…Our God is a God of second chances.” Our God is all about second chances.