

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “God is a Restoring God” (John 21:1-19)**

**April 18, 2010**

In the summer of 2003 I took my wife to see *Seabiscuit*, an extremely moving film that shows us what restoration looks like. Based on a true story this film recounts how a racehorse named Seabiscuit that had been written off after an injury was physically restored and went on to win many stunning victories. By the end of Seabiscuit’s career it had become at that point in time (1940) the all-time leading money winner in horse racing history, and went on to sire 108 foals. Seabiscuit’s story of restoration became a source of encouragement and inspiration during the Great Depression. I was very moved by that film because it is a beautiful picture of something that we see in today’s Gospel passage from John 21, in which Jesus restored Peter.

We live in a throw-away culture. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that the United States produces about 220 million tons of garbage each year, which would cover more than 82,000 football fields six feet deep in compacted garbage. That is in spite of all the current recycling efforts. When things are used or broken we tend to throw them away. Unfortunately this is not only the case with impersonal things like cars, clothes, furniture, and cell phones, but also personal things like marriages, friendships, and beliefs. Our world is full of people who feel like they have thrown away like flotsam and jetsam. The good news is that although we are a throw-away culture, God is *not* a throw-away God. God is a restoring God.

One of my favorite websites is dictionary.com, from which I receive a daily “word of the day” email (yes, I know that’s quite nerdy ☺). Listen to how dictionary.com defines the verb, *restore*: “to bring back into existence or use; to bring back to a former, original, or normal condition, to bring back to a state of health, soundness, or vigor; to put back to a former place, or to a former position.” To restore means to bring back to the way it’s supposed to be. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God does these things for us. God restores us as he restored Peter.

In John 21 we see that some of the disciples were together again. Jesus had appeared to them twice. They had seen his scars. Even Thomas was a believer now. And yet Peter was still plagued with guilt about what he had done in denying Jesus three times in his darkest hour. As far as his standing with Jesus went, Peter considered himself a failure. So Peter had done what many of us do when we feel guilty or like a failure—he returned to what he knew. He went fishing. “I am going fishing,” he told his fellow disciples, several of whom joined him.

They fished all night long, and caught absolutely nothing.

That’s when Jesus showed up. At dawn the disciples dimly saw someone standing on the shore. This person called out and asked them if they had caught anything, to which the disciples

answered bluntly, “No.” Then Jesus tells them, “Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” Peter and the other disciples were seasoned fisherman. After being out fishing all night I imagine the last thing they wanted were some helpful suggestions.

Think of a time in your life when you were doing something that you’ve been doing for a long time and someone comes out of nowhere to tell you how to do it better. What was your initial reaction? And yet the disciples didn’t respond that way. Instead, they did what Jesus told them to do. They cast the net off the right side of their boat and caught so many fish they were unable to haul it in. After catching a grand total of 0 fish all night, the disciples had caught 153 fish in a matter of minutes. It was at that point that John recognized that the man calling out to them from the shore was none other than the risen Jesus Christ.

Sometimes in our lives we go through seasons in which we give everything we have to something and see very little or no results. And then God intervenes and you can hardly keep up with all the ways he blesses you. This was the case in one of my favorite movies, *Forrest Gump*. After coming home from Vietnam, Forrest—per the suggestion from his friend, Bubba, who had been died in his arms after being wounded in battle—moved to the Gulf Coast to start the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company. He is later joined by Lieutenant Dan, and the two of them spend weeks trying to catch shrimp, but caught only a few. Mostly their nets were filled with garbage—boots, toilet seats, license plates, etc.—with only a few shrimp. Then after an act of God in the form of a hurricane they caught so many shrimp they could not keep up with it.

The same thing happened to the disciples. They fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus intervened and they could hardly contain their catch. After John recognizes Jesus, Peter, like Forrest Gump had done upon Lieutenant Dan’s arrival, jumped out of the boat to swim to Jesus as fast as he could.

Jesus asked Peter and the others to bring some of the fish they had caught, and simply said, “Come and have breakfast.” Jesus knew that after being out fishing all night the disciples were probably very hungry, so he made breakfast for them. This shows the tender concern Jesus had for his disciples, a tender concern he has for all of us. The disciples then gathered around the charcoal fire and ate the breakfast Jesus had prepared for them.

Then Jesus restored Peter.

After they ate, Jesus, in front of the other disciples, directly addressed the issue that had been weighing Peter down, Peter’s guilt about having denied him three times. Peter was feeling down and out. In the early 1900’s an American songwriter named Jimmy Cox wrote a song called, *Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out*, which later became a popular song during the Great Depression. Eric Clapton covered this on his Grammy-winning 1992 *Unplugged* album as he sang:

Nobody knows you  
When you're down and out.  
In your pocket, not one penny  
And as for friends, you don't have any.

When you finally get back up on your feet again  
Everybody wants to be your old long-lost friend  
Said it's mighty strange, without a doubt  
Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

The good news of the gospel is that even if “nobody knows you when you're down and out,” God does. In fact, God knows you *especially* when you are down and out. When Peter was down and out, Jesus met him right there, and restored him. Moreover, Jesus was intentionally compassionate and specific about how he restored Peter.

Jesus restored Peter as he sat in front of a charcoal fire. This is significant, because the night in which Peter had denied Jesus three times he had done so while warming himself in front of a charcoal fire. By intentionally restoring him in front of a charcoal fire, Jesus gave Peter a tangible sign of his grace.

Jesus addressed Peter as “Simon,” Peter’s original name. Near the beginning of John’s account of the gospel Andrew had brought Simon to Jesus, who said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)” (John 1:42). Cephas means “rock.” Similarly when Simon Peter had correctly identified Jesus as the Son of God at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon... I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:17-18). Jesus knew that Peter, having denied him three times, felt like anything but a rock, and certainly felt that the gates of hell had prevailed against him, rather than the other way around. And so Jesus met Peter right there and addressed him as “Simon.”

Then Jesus asked him, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asked Peter this question three times, the same number of times Peter had denied him. He gave Peter three chances to proclaim his love for the One whom he had denied. God is not just a God of second chances. God gave Peter multiple chances, and he does the same for you and me. Even though Peter had denied Jesus, Jesus would not deny Peter. God is always faithful to us, even when we’re unfaithful to him. In his Second Letter to Timothy Paul writes: “if we are faithless, (God) remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2:13).

Not only does Jesus give Peter three opportunities to proclaim his love for him, he also gives him three charges: “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.” In other words, “Peter,

care for my followers.” Jesus reinstates Peter as a servant in his church. God is not a throw away God. God is a restoring God.

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) Jesus emphasizes that God is a restoring God as he describes how the rebellious son is completely restored by his father. When the rebellious son finally returns home after squandering his inheritance on his lust and selfishness, the father not only throws a welcome home party, he also gives his son three things: a robe that he was the restored guest of honor, a ring signifying his restored authority, and sandals signifying his restored position as his son. The gracious father gave his son these three things in the presence of his family and friends. Jesus graciously gave Peter full restoration as well in the presence of his disciples.

Jesus graciously, tenderly, and fully restored Peter. He restored him in front of a charcoal fire like the one by which he sat when he denied him. He addressed him as “Simon,” knowing he felt like anything but a rock. He gave him three opportunities to proclaim his love for him. He charged him three times to care for his sheep. In short, Jesus gave Peter a brand new start.

And this restored Peter, only weeks later, preached a sermon on Pentecost to which three thousand people responded by putting their faith in the One who restores us, Jesus Christ. This restored Peter preached the gospel to many people throughout the Roman Empire, and endured much persecution over the course of his apostolic ministry. This restored Peter eventually was martyred during the reign of the notorious Roman emperor Nero, crucified upside down because he did not consider himself worthy to die the same way as the One who had restored him. Peter, who had been called by Jesus to be the rock only to deny him three times in his darkest hour, was fully restored by Jesus. And God did many amazing things in, through, and in spite of, the restored Simon Peter.

Perhaps today you, like Peter at the beginning of today’s Gospel passage, are weighed down by guilt or feel like a failure, or if you feel like you’ve been thrown away like so many other things in our culture. Or maybe you’ve been badly hurt and feel written off like Seabiscuit. Or maybe you feel like you’ve been fishing all night in some way in your life and have caught absolutely nothing, or that you are in the midst of a hurricane like the one in which Forrest Gump and Lieutenant Dan found themselves.

In John 21 we see that the good news is that God forgives and restores, tenderly, compassionately, completely. In his book, *The Message of John*, Bruce Milne writes, “No matter how desperate our failure, or how deep-seated our shame, (God) can forgive and renew us and then use us in his service. Failure is never final with God” (p. 317).

The good news is that through his death on the cross Jesus restored all of us, like he did Peter. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was thrown out by the ones he came to save. Nobody wanted to know Jesus when he was down and out, naked, abandoned, crucified outside of town between

two thieves. Jesus died for us. Jesus was thrown away on our behalf. This same Jesus was raised on the third day. Because of the death of Jesus on the cross our right standing with God has been restored, and because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the sure and certain hope that one day all things will be fully restored in Jesus Christ.

The good news is that in Jesus Christ God gives us what Jesus gave Peter in today's passage: a brand new start. Jesus Christ restores us. He brings us back.

God is not a throw-away God. God is a restoring God

Let us pray...