

God can use you...even when it seems too late

Last week we talked about ministry. But we attached a different person than maybe you're used to seeing attached to the word. Rather than talk about what 'ministers'—pastors and such—do, **we talked about the ministry you are called to by God.**

And while these sort of discussions can often make a **person feel guilty**—pointing out how we're not doing our duty as Christians and such—I **thought perhaps a different approach should be taken.**

See, I believe that most people **want to be the type of Christian they read about** in the Bible: loving others, doing great works and showing people how to really, truly find God. **The problem is they feel wholly inadequate to do it**, except maybe once in a while here and there.

But God does not call us to fail, and he's certainly called us :

John 15:15-17

15 I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. 16 You didn't choose me. I chose you. **I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. 17 This is my command: Love each other.**

And so last week we talked about the **fears and doubts Moses had** and how they apply to us...if you missed it, it'll be on TV this afternoon.

But Moses wasn't the only guy in the Bible to have problems fulfilling the call of God on his life. In fact, **I don't know that I can think of one person** who went about doing God's work without some resistance.

I know that may **not be the most encouraging thing** to say if you're someone who is **struggling to follow the call of God in your life**. But rather than see it as a downside, think about it this way: **nothing good—nothing revolutionary or amazing or world-changing or life changing—ever comes easy.**

The very best things in life are **always on a road filled with challenges, obstacles, opposition and pitfalls**—not the least of which is often **our own failures.**

But if **there's one thing we** can take from the Bible, it's that God forgives our sins and our faux pas. **And when he forgives, he really forgives.** He's a God of second chances, and many more **and even when it feels like it's too late, God can still use us in ministry.**

There are a lot of stories about this in the Bible, **but none capture it so well in my mind as the life of Simon Peter.** I was going to look at a few stories from his life...but the more I focused on one particular story, **the more I found it a compelling and universal experience.**

Open your bibles to Matthew 14:22

22 Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. 23 After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

24 Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. 25 About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

27 But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

28 Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

29 "Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

31 Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

This is one of my favorite all-time Bible stories and there's **so much golden truth here that I could spend an hour on just this verse**—but I won't...and the crowd cheers.

This story is sort of a **parable of the cycles we go through in our faith.** We all walk with God at times and then **suddenly—sometimes inexplicably—we just sink.** We go from **righteous to sinful** in the blink of an eye.

But I think there's a lesson to be learned here: **sometimes we have to sink before we can grow.** Because as **amazing as walking on water may be, it doesn't grow our faith.** Us humans are an **ungrateful and forgetful lot** and we're quick to forget the blessings of God.

But we remember our struggles forever.

And sometimes God understands that a **heart that gets what it wants** all the time soon becomes **selfish, spoiled and focused on itself**. But a heart that hurts a little **seeks out comfort in those who understand or are experiencing that same pain**.

And then real ministry can happen.

And it might be easy to be **angry at God** for allowing this sort of pain into our lives until we **remember the way he came to earth in Jesus. He suffered alongside us and became a servant**.

The amazing thing about that is that **we often see his service as him somehow giving up his Godly nature**. But I want you to take a look at this quote from Henri Nouwen, because he explains it better than me.

“The implication of God’s willing role as a servant is that humility and self-emptying are not a step away from who God is, but towards who he is. God does not dishonor himself, become less or hide who he is by being a servant. Indeed, the opposite is true: God is more fully revealed in service. He chooses servanthood as his form of self-revelation.”

God understand the truth that **true relationship is built in service—in ministry—to each other**. We like to say us humans minister but God has us all beat by a mile! By a million miles!

And a **weird, beautiful thing happens when two people come together in their pain**. Even though **the math doesn’t add up logically**, in the **math of relationships and community it adds up perfectly**:

Hurt + Hurt = Hope.

Alone with our failures and pain, we suffer and despair. **But give us one person to share those things with in a loving and holy friendship, and suddenly hope is born**.

And how fitting is it that a **relationship is the catalyst**? It speaks to the nature of God that **pain cannot overcome the hope born out of love and community, even when that community is based on shared pain**.

And without our failures, **we rarely seek out those opportunities with others.** We just sit back **happy with our success:** Sometimes you need to sink to grow **your faith.**

The question that now comes to mind is **why did Peter begin to doubt?** He was living the dream! Walking on water!?! I mean, it might be tricky to believe in God when times are rough, but it's a little **harder to doubt him when you're literally defying the law of gravity.**

There's an important lesson to learn here, too: **there's no amount of proof to ever fully conquer doubt.** Because following God's call will **always mean someone or something is standing there in your way telling you that you can't do it, or actively trying to stop you.**

If you're **waiting for unequivocal proof** to believe in what God has for you, not only might you be waiting a long time, but there's **no guarantee that any proof will convince beyond the first few steps.** As real as God's call is for Christians, **it's not something we can grab a hold of or see.**

But the **things we're struggling against are real** and in our face all the time. For Peter it was a **storm, gravity and physics.** The real world! He looked around and saw so many things working against him here, that he lost faith...**even in the middle of his first miracle.**

And when we fail, God knows that **stress, anger, lust, loneliness, pain, indecision and things beyond our control at times; all these things work against us.** This isn't to excuse our sins by any means.

But God **does not abandon the purpose he has for us** because the real world convinced us to **abandon that purpose**—even if it **happens mid-miracle** like it did for Peter.

Just look at how this story ends: **Jesus rescues his fallen disciple, lovingly shows him where he went wrong and carries him back to safety so he can continue to be who God made him to be.**

And here's the crazy part: **Jesus probably knew what was going to happen.** In the verses just before this, it says Jesus insisted that the disciples go ahead and he'd meet up with them on the other side of the lake.

He **knew Peter's faith would falter** and still sent them ahead, still **called Peter from the boat.**

He didn't say "**No, Peter. Stay there. Your faith isn't sufficient.**" He called Peter into a situation **he knew Peter would fail at...but did he actually fail?**

I've always said that God **doesn't test us to see how much faith we have**. God doesn't need a test to find that out—he knows everything. **God tests us to show US how much faith we have**. It helps to see them **less as tests and more as homework**.

And while Peter certainly failed at walking on the water all the way to Jesus... **he took a lot more steps than any of the other disciples**. So all at once, Jesus is able to **show Peter how much faith he had...and how far he still had to go**. **And that took some failing on Peter's part**.

Now some might say that's **manipulative or unfair** of God, but I don't see anything manipulative or wrong with **setting someone up to succeed** and **fulfill their eventual purpose**, even if it means they **have to fail in the moment**.

I mean, isn't this how life works most of the time, anyways? We **fall off the bike** to learn to ride it. We **miss questions on homework** on our way to **passing a test**. We say and **do stupid things early in a relationship** so we can learn how to **treat others with love and respect**.

So even if you feel like it's too late, like you're hopeless and messed up beyond repair, remember that **we must often fail in order to become who we need to be**. And know that God knows it.

There's one last thing we can draw from this story today, and even though it might be talked about too often, I feel it's worth noting.

In order to fulfill our call to ministry, **it's vital that Jesus—not the obstacles and challenges—be our focus**.

You tend to **work with whatever you focus on**, and when your focus is the things stopping you, you gravitate to them and guess what? **They stop you**. This doesn't mean you ignore the obstacles, **but your focus must be on God and what he's called you to do**.

I can **focus on the road** when I'm driving and **still be aware of other cars**, but if I'm **constantly watching the other cars** I'm liable to **go off the road or hit a pedestrian** or something.

You can't help someone **overcome addiction** when your focus is on your own **inadequacies**.

You can't be there to **cry alongside someone** in their pain when all you can think about is **how bad you are at helping people**.

You see this in Jesus' ministry. **He didn't focus on the sins** of people and whether they might taint him. **He focused on the people**. **Ate** with them; **loved** them; **ministered** to them—and he did it by **becoming one of them in the incarnation**; by being human. **By putting himself on their level, even if it meant giving something up**.

He didn't focus on fighting the Romans or Pharisees or **overcoming the mountain of spiritual and earthly obstacles** to his mission. **He focused on the cross**.

Hebrews 12:1-4

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, **especially the sin that so easily trips us up**. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. 2 We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. **Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross**, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. 3 Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. 4 **After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin**.

The **JOY** awaiting him. What was that joy? **Our salvation. The fulfillment of HIS purpose**.

Wherever you find **true service, true ministry, you find joy**. Think of a mother nursing her child. She **doesn't need a reward** to serve her children—they **ARE** her joy.

And when we seek out **Jesus** and his **calling**, we find **joy** in that. So while we may be seeking the **lost**, the **hurting**, and the **hopeless** in this world, **what we're truly seeking is the face of God**.

Remember that quote from Henri Nouwen? **God chose to reveal himself as a servant**—because that's his nature—and he **calls us to reveal him to others in the same way**.

And he **doesn't care that we've failed in the past**. Those failures have **shown us the faith we have** and helped us to **deepen that same faith**. Those failures have **taught us to rely on him and focus on our calling**, not our struggles.

And those failures may be our incarnation. Just like **God sought human form** in order to **reveal himself to those he loved**. **We can use our failures in order to reveal the God of love to those we're called to**.

The greatest **triumph Satan had** in the history of the world was **Jesus' death on the cross**. And it was the **very thing that served to destroy sin and neuter Satan's power**. And when the disciples **thought it was too late** and **all hope was lost**, **God knew that it had just begun and all hope was found!**

Maybe sin has played a similar role in your life. **And defeated and hopeless, you think it's too late**.

But God would remind you today that **you have died and been reborn alongside Christ**. You are a **new creation** and what **once may have seemed like your greatest failure**, God can transform into a **great victory**.

And much like his son, he can take what was **meant to kill you**, and use it **bring life to someone else**.

Ya know, I **don't know that Jesus fully understood** how his death would bring life. **But he was willing to trust God and be obedient**.

Are you?

May you find that your hurt can bring hope. That your failure can be a victory. And may the things sent to kill you, become the very things God uses to bring life.