

WE BELIEVE IN THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES

Pastor Vern Christopherson

JOHN 21:1-19NRSV

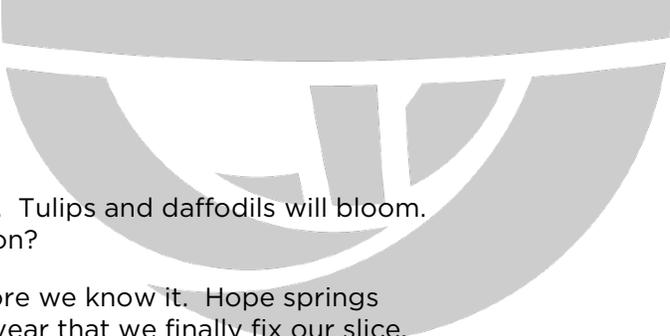
After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."



Spring is coming. The sun will be out. The snow will melt. Tulips and daffodils will bloom. I'm just sure of it. Can I get an amen from the congregation?

Those of us who are golfers will be out on the course before we know it. Hope springs eternal in this great game of ours. Maybe this will be the year that we finally fix our slice, or learn to hit out of the sand trap, or start making mid-range putts. Can I get an amen from the congregation?

Those of you who are not golfers may not know that golfers have a secret weapon. It helps them feel better about their game. It's called a mulligan. Hit a bad shot that ends up in somebody's backyard, just take a mulligan. Miss a really short putt that no respectable golfer should ever miss, take a mulligan. Shank your ball into the lake, well, they shouldn't have put that lake there in the first place; take a mulligan. A mulligan is a kind of grace note in an otherwise unforgiving game. Can I get an amen from the congregation?

Of course, I'm speaking about mulligans in a theoretical sense. I've never actually taken one myself. I have far too much respect for the integrity of the game. And if you believe that, I have a bridge in the Sahara Desert that I'd like to sell you. Truth be told, lots of us duffers take mulligans from time to time. And as we do, it's probably good to keep in mind that these mulligans have a better feel if they're offered to us from our playing partners as a gift, and not as our due.

Now, golfers and non-golfers alike might be wondering: *Wouldn't it be great to be able to take mulligans in other areas of life?* Imagine: a police officer stops you for speeding, and you just tear up the ticket. Thanks officer, I'll be taking my mulligan. Right you are, the officer says. Or, you get into an argument with a friend and say something you regret. Mulligan. Or, you flunk an exam, mess up a presentation at work, forget to send in your taxes. Mulligan. No questions asked.

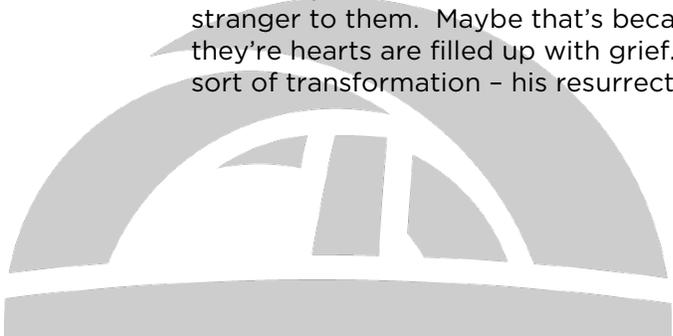
To be honest, we all need a mulligan from time to time, a do-over. We let each other down. We don't always tell the truth. We spend a lot more time looking out for our own interests rather than the interests of others. As the Apostle Paul puts it: "All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

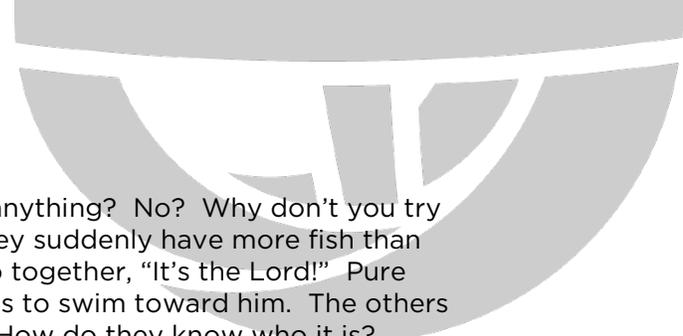
In our reading for today, Peter is desperately in need of a mulligan. At the end of John's Gospel, the Risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene, and then to the disciples, and then to Thomas. An Easter faith come to life as Jesus reveals himself to them, if only for a fleeting moment. They make bold confessions of faith: *I have seen the Lord. It's him.*

A group of disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee. We're not sure when they got there, but I can imagine that some time has passed. Folks like Peter and Andrew, James and John - fishermen by trade - are back in Galilee. As wonderful as Easter might be, it's still rather unbelievable to them. And they're not sure what to do next.

I like the feel of this story. Jesus goes and finds those disciples in the midst of ordinary life. Isn't that what we need in our lives - not only a stained-glass Jesus who speaks words meant for the holiest of occasions, but also a Jesus in the kitchen, "amid the pot and pans," as Teresa of Avila puts it? We need a Jesus who comes to us on the beach or in the office or while we're shopping at Hy-Vee.

Like many of the Easter stories, these fishermen don't recognize Jesus at first. He's a stranger to them. Maybe that's because they're not looking for him. Maybe it's because their hearts are filled up with grief. Or maybe it's because Jesus has undergone some sort of transformation - his resurrected body is different than before.





The stranger speaks to them from the shoreline, “Catch anything? No? Why don’t you try fishing on the other side of the boat?” When they do, they suddenly have more fish than they know what to do with.” Someone puts two and two together, “It’s the Lord!” Pure pandemonium ensues. Peter jumps in the lake and begins to swim toward him. The others scramble for their oars, dragging the nets behind them. How do they know who it is? Evidently Jesus is known, not only in the breaking of bread, not only in the words of Scripture, but in the impact he has on people’s everyday lives.

When they arrive on the shore, there’s a charcoal fire waiting for them. There’s also an invitation, “Come and have breakfast.” One thing soon becomes clear: if the disciples want a taste of resurrection life, they need to sit down and eat what Jesus is offering. They need to have eyes and ears open to his coming.

After breakfast, the focus shifts to Peter. I have a hunch that the smell of the charcoal fire reminds him of an event he’s been trying to forget. In the courtyard of the high priest, with a charcoal fire to warm himself, Peter was asked three times if he was a disciple of Jesus. And three times he said no. Now, with Jesus standing in front of him, Peter has to face the uncomfortable truth of who he is and what he has done.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks him. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus doesn’t start with, “Peter, are you sorry for what you’ve done? Do you promise never to fail me again? Will you try harder next time?” No, first things first, Jesus asks him, “Do you love me?”

This is an incredibly tender question. When you ask it, your heart is on the line. This is a question of a hopeful lover. It’s a question a parent longs to ask a runaway teenager but is afraid to say it.

It’s a question that Tevye, the milkman, asks his wife in *Fiddler on the Roof*. If you remember the story, they have an arranged marriage, set up by a matchmaker. One day Tevye asks his wife, “Golde, do you love me?”

“Do I *what?*” Golde responds. Tevye asks it again, “Do you love me?” She is not prepared for this discussion. She has done the things a wife was supposed to do in that culture. Fulfilled obligations. Maintained the household. Looked after the children.

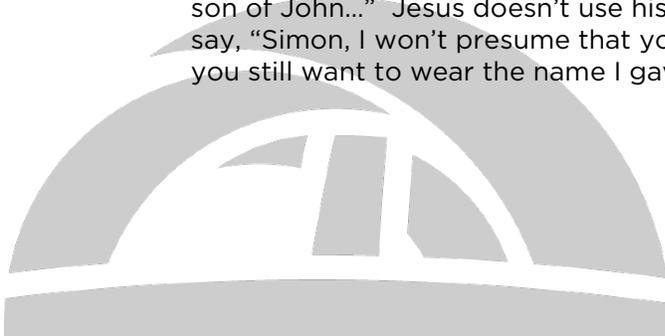
Again the question: “Do you love me?” She tells him he’s a fool. Tevye agrees, but still he wants an answer.

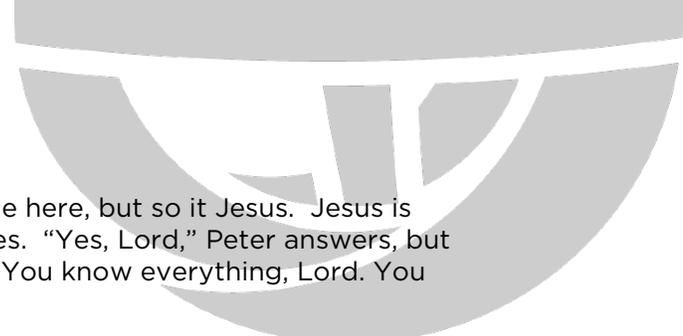
“Do I love him?” Golde muses, partly to him and partly to herself. She reviews twenty-five years of life together – hope and suffering and fighting and sharing a home and a bed. “If that’s not love,” she says, “what is?”

Then, almost like a little child, Tevye exclaims, “You love me.” “Golde responds, “I suppose I do.” To which Tevye replies, “And I suppose I love you too.”

“It doesn’t change a thing,” they sing in harmony, “but even so, after twenty-five years, it’s nice to know.” Indeed, it doesn’t change a thing – they still have the same tasks to do, the same lives to lead – but really, it changes everything.

“Do you love me?” Jesus’ question to Peter hangs in the air. We can’t help but feel that Peter’s answer might change everything. Notice how Jesus frames the question: “Simon, son of John...” Jesus doesn’t use his old nickname, Peter. He uses his formal name, as if to say, “Simon, I won’t presume that you want the old intimate relationship. I won’t presume you still want to wear the name I gave you.”





“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter is vulnerable here, but so is Jesus. Jesus is the Lover waiting to hear the response of the one he loves. “Yes, Lord,” Peter answers, but he doesn’t fully trust his ability to assess his own heart. “You know everything, Lord. You know.”

We can understand Peter’s answer, can’t we? “Lord, you know. As best we can, we do love you. When we’re in a good spot and a right frame of mind, we do.” But sometimes we don’t know the truth of our own hearts either. Lord, you know.”

Despite Peter’s equivocation, Jesus says to him, “Tend my sheep. Love and teach and guard and guide and serve the little flock that means all the world to me.”

Three times Jesus asks this question, until Peter gets his feelings hurt. Why does Jesus keep asking? I mean, imagine if someone you care about asked you whether you really love him or her, not once, not twice, but three times. You’d probably get your feelings hurt too. But what Peter doesn’t know is that he is being given a mulligan, and not one that’s his due, but one that’s pure gift, a life-changing gift. What Peter doesn’t know is that he is being offered forgiveness and healing by the God of the second chance.

As the episode draws to a close, Jesus reminds Peter of the cost in being his disciple. Someday he’s going to come to the same end that Jesus did. And just so Peter won’t forget his role, Jesus says to him, “Follow me,” as if to imply: “That’s what a disciple is supposed to do.”

So, is there anyone here who can’t relate to Peter, anyone who doesn’t need a second chance from Jesus every now and then? Anyone? I didn’t think so. This is our story. We find ourselves in this position more often than we care to admit. A woman had had a complicated, conflict-filled relationship with her dad. She loved him but was angry at him, and her response was to withdraw. Finally, in another part of the country, her dad died alone, and now she’s filled with regret. She would do anything for a second chance.

A man has been involved in questionable business practices. Now he lives in fear of being found out, of being disgraced. He’s painfully aware that his life has been built on deception and fraud. Maybe nobody will ever know, but he knows. His dishonesty is like a spiritual cancer eating away at his soul. He would do anything for a second chance.

Here’s the truth: Before me in this church sit ordinary people who could use a second chance in their lives, a mulligan not as their due, but as a gift. My friends, know that the Risen Christ will come and find you wherever you are, no matter what you have done. Like those disciples on the beach, you just need eyes and ears open to his coming. He wants to forgive you and make things right. He wants to heal your heart and call you to be his disciple. He wants to know if you love him, because really, love changes everything.

Always remember, this is not just about you. Jesus also wants you to love and teach and guard and guide and serve the little flock that means all the world to him. That’s what disciples are called to do.

This is good news, don’t you think? Because of Easter, we believe in the God of second chances, and those second chances make all the difference in your life and in mine. Can I get an amen from the congregation?

Thanks be to God.

