

Sermon for May 5, 2019
Acts 9: 1-20 and John 21: 1-17
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Lord Jesus, bless and redeem these words and those who hear them. Amen.

The Blessing of Second Chances

“Growing in Faith; Sharing the Good News; Living in God’s Love.” What is that? That is the Vision Statement for St. Andrew Church. Vision statements are only as useful as churches live into and exhibit them, so it’s a good habit to evaluate yourselves, your committees, and this church against the statement to see if you are actually doing those things. How are you growing in the faith? Where and with whom are you sharing the good news; and in what ways are you living God’s love? But what I noticed about this vision statement is that it is also a good rule of thumb for preaching because a worthwhile sermon will help us grow in faith; it will inspire us to share the good news; and it will hopefully illustrate how we can live in God’s love.

Now that I’ve set myself up, let me add a disclaimer. I may not hit all those points today, but our readings this morning certainly say something to us about *living in God’s love* when we extend the grace of second chances.

As I mulled over the many second chances with which I’ve been blessed in my life, I thought about one I would like to share with you. I was pastor at my first church, Big Cove Church, for thirteen years. First calls are always special calls, and the relationship I had with that church was, by God’s grace, a very healthy and life-giving one. When I began to sense that, just as God called me to that church, God was calling me to leave it, I was quite anxious about how to let the congregation know. After all, I had never left a church, as its pastor, before.

After much thought and prayer, what I decided to do was to write the session members a letter before informing the congregation. My thinking was that would help get them over the initial shock and, as church leaders, they could then assist me in helping the congregation cope with the news. Well, you know the old saying: Good intentions pave the way to hell.

What I failed to do, what didn’t even enter my mind, was to send that same letter to Big Cove’s deacons. When I thought of leadership, I thought of the elders, even though I am a big believer in the equality of all three offices in our church: deacons, elders, and ministers. My fatal mistake wasn’t that I thought about sending the letter to the deacons and then decided they weren’t worthy; my mistake wasn’t that I forgot to send them the letter; my mistake was that I did not think of them at all.

So, when one of our deacons began getting calls inquiring about my departure, and she found out that the session members had known about it ahead of time, she was, in a word, “displeased” with me. I got the cold shoulder. I got the crossed arms while I preached. I got the glare. When I asked her what was going on, she was so angry she could hardly talk, so she stormed off.

I still didn’t know what the issue was, so I called her and asked if we could meet, and thankfully, she said yes. She was considerably calmer, but still quite hurt, when we talked, and she explained to me that as an ordained leader in the congregation, she, and the other two deacons, should have received the same letter, and consideration, as the elders received. She told me about her sense of embarrassment and helplessness when people asked her why I was leaving, because she was one of the last people to get the letter.

I was mortified. I cannot put into words how badly I felt that I had slighted anyone, especially someone who had been so faithful and supportive. I had messed up. All I could do was tell her the truth. I said, “I am so sorry. I did not even think about the deacons. I was thinking only of the government of the church, and I totally hurt and let you down. All I can tell you is that I failed. I hope you will forgive me.”

Now, this deacon had two choices. She could hold onto her hurt and anger—as many of us do when we’ve been offended--share her anger with others, and cause my departure to be tainted; or she could forgive me, give me a second chance, and allow my departure to be a joyous celebration for all we had accomplished together. It took her a moment, but she forgave me. Not only did she forgive me, she let it go. She allowed everything to return to normal, and to this day, we still have a mutual friendship and respect for each other. Blessing someone with a second chance is part of your vision statement; it’s part of *living in God’s love*, the love God has for us.

Thank God—literally—for Jesus Christ. Thank God—literally—that he is a God who offers second chances, even to the most unlikely and least deserving people, and teaches us to do the same. That is the good news that unfolds in both our readings today.

Consider the story from Acts, the famous conversion of Saul. Here is a man, whom, we are told, is “still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples.” *Still*, which implies that even the death of Jesus and that of the first martyr, Stephen, who was stoned, wasn’t enough blood for him. Here is a man seeking permission from the local authorities to arrest and persecute followers of Jesus elsewhere, anywhere he can find them, even 150 miles away. Here is a man obsessed; here is a man that Jesus knows without a doubt is his enemy: “Saul, why do *you* persecute *me*?”

And yet, out of all the people Jesus could have chosen, he selects the least likely one to receive the gift of a second chance. Why Saul? What did he ever do to deserve a second

chance? He wasn't even trying to be a follower. Even Ananias is stunned. It is not an easy thing for him to do, but Ananias obeys Christ and goes as his spokesperson to deliver the grace-filled words of second chance: "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." *Brother* Saul. We can only imagine how difficult that must have been for Ananias, perhaps as difficult as it is for us to offer someone against whom we hold a grudge or bias a second chance.

How might history have unfolded if Jesus hadn't offered Saul that second chance? Most likely Saul would have continued his hunt for believers. Maybe he would have found a way to have Peter, and James, and John killed. Perhaps he would never have changed but remained a religious zealot who maintained clear lines of who was in, and who was out, and we, the Gentiles, would never have received the good news.

But as the story tells us, for three days, Saul was in prayer. For three days, Saul physically was blind. And on the third day, when the second chance was offered, he accepted it and the gift of new life: becoming a witness to the Lord and the world's greatest evangelist.

What about Peter? Three times he denied even knowing Jesus, his best friend, his Lord, when Jesus most needed him. I suspect if a friend betrayed us, or ignored us, three times, we'd take our hurt feelings home and write that person off. Instead, Jesus asked Peter, the least likely disciple, if Peter loved him. Three times.

How might history have unfolded if Jesus hadn't offered Peter a second chance, but instead had scolded Peter for bailing on him? Or had told Peter he could no longer be his follower because Peter had disappointed him? Or had told Peter he couldn't trust him and wanted nothing to do with him? Instead of providing the solid foundation upon which Jesus built his church, Peter, perhaps would have just gone home and taken up fishing again.

But, when Peter replied the third time with a fervent, "Yes, I do love you, Lord!" he received the new life offered to him: caring for the flock that became the Christian Church, the flock to which we all belong.

Of course, the least likely to be given second chances aren't just Saul and Peter. They are also you and me, recipients of second, and third, and fourth chances given by our Lord Jesus. They are our friends, and family members, and neighbors. Think of the difference the blessing of a second chance can make in a marriage—between siblings—among church members—with friends—in neighborhoods. And think what happens when that second chance is withheld or denied. I know what that feels like, too, and believe me, I'd rather be blessed than cursed any day. And I would rather be one who extends a blessing rather than a curse; wouldn't you?

When Peter accepted his second chance, Jesus told him to “Follow me!” He says the same to us every time we accept his offer of grace and forgiveness and also extend it to others. By following Jesus, we, too, become like our Lord, Easter people who demonstrate that the Resurrected Lord is the Lord of new life, and new life begins with the healing balm of giving and receiving second chances.

Thanks be to God.