Rev. Kathleen McShane May 17, 2015

Echoing in Our Ears: "Do Not Be Afraid"
What If I Can't Go Back?
John 21:15-19

I went to a comedy club the other night. It's not something I do often, but the son of a friend of mine—a young man I watched grow up--was competing in a stand-up comedy competition. So I went—out of curiosity about who he has become as a young adult, and so I could vote for him, whether he was funny or not.

The best comics that night were the ones who made fun of themselves. The ones who were gay or immigrants or overweight seemed to have a distinct advantage in terms of material for their routines. They entertained us by commenting smartly, ironically, on the ways they don't fit in, the mistakes they've made, the moments they've been humiliated or embarrassed. The audience laughed hardest when they told these stories—maybe out of sympathy, or because we could identify with the comic's experience; maybe out of our own discomfort.

For the most part, humor seems like a pretty healthy way to deal with things that might otherwise ashame or embarrass us. But we've all heard stories of comedians who are deeply unhappy inside—Robin Williams, Dave Chappelle. Perhaps you've known people who use humor as a shield against the self-doubt they struggle with. Maybe you've done it yourself. Self-consciousness and regret—for what we have done, or about what we are, moments we have not lived up to our own hopes for ourselves, wrong decisions we have made—regret lives in some place deep inside of us, usually a place we try hard to keep hidden, invisible.

And regret—Peter's regret—is what today's story from the Gospel of John is about. Here's the scene: It's after Jesus' resurrection; the disciples are still a little off-balance about how it is that the same Jesus who already died can keep appearing to them as if he's alive. They're not sure where he's going to show up, or if he's going to show up again. Everything seems sort of unpredictable, chaotic. The project they've been working on for the past three years—the thing they thought was going to change the world—is pretty clearly a failure. And so they've gone back to something they know well, something that can give them some sense of familiarity and competence: fishing.

They fished all night and caught nothing. "Can't even do this any more," they must have been thinking. And then someone called to them from the shore, suggesting that they drop their nets on the other side of the boat—the same way Jesus had told them to do the first time they met him. And just like that first time, when they followed this strange man's fishing advice, the fish came—hundreds of them. This time, when it happened again, something clicked. That shadowy figure on the beach, that man whose face was obscured by the sun's first light, had to be Jesus. Peter was the first one to recognize him. He tore off that boat and took off swimming toward shore.

But however long that swim took, however glad he was to see Jesus, Peter had to have a growing sense of anxiety about what he would say when he climbed out of the water, onto the beach.

…Because the last story this Gospel told us about Peter, *before* Jesus' death, wasn't pretty. Peter was standing in a courtyard, waiting with other bystanders to hear the news of what happened to Jesus in his trial. He hovered near the rest of the crowd, trying to stay invisible, but also trying to casually overhear how they were going to sentence Jesus for the crimes the authorities had accused him of.

Three times in that courtyard someone asked Peter, "Aren't you one of his disciples? Don't you know him?" And three times, Peter answered, as nonchalantly as he could, "Nope, never talked to the man." And just as he finished his stammering answer the third time, a rooster crowed, reminding Peter, painfully, that just the night before, Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny him three times before the dawn of a new day. "I would never do that," Peter had responded. "Yes, you will," Jesus replied.

There on the beach, a few weeks later, Peter had no choice but to face his failure of friendship, the moment he had lost his courage. When he staggered, dripping, out of the water and onto the shore where Jesus was waiting for him, he had no idea what Jesus would say. No doubt he was worried about whether this relationship had been broken irretrievably. Peter had watched Jesus forgive other people before, but maybe his offense was worse than all the others. What if he had betrayed his friend in a way that was simply too big to forgive, too serious to deflect with a joke? What if…Peter must have been asking himself…what if the crack he had caused in this relationship was so deep, that it couldn't be glued back together?

Everything about the way John tells this story holds an echo of that night of betrayal, for Peter and for us. John tells us that there was a charcoal fire burning on the beach as Jesus prepared breakfast. That detail is meant to call up for us the memory of that night in the courtyard, when Peter warmed his cold hands around a fire. In front of that fire, while Jesus was being interrogated, strangers asked Peter—three times—whether he was Jesus' friend. In front of *this* fire, on the beach, Jesus asks Peter, three times, "Do you love me?"

Twice, Peter answers Jesus, "Yes, of course I love you." But Jesus asks again. The third time, Peter answers with exasperation, "Lord, you know *everything.* You *know* that I love you." This reminds us too of all that Jesus knew about Peter. This too reminds us of that other night when Jesus had known in advance that Peter's loyalty would fail when the crisis came.

Three times, Jesus gave Peter a chance to remember—to say out loud—the truth, the only truth that could save him from being ground up by his regret. And Jesus' response to him, each time—"Feed my sheep;" take my place in caring for the people I love—those were the words of forgiveness. Those were the words that said to Peter, "Nothing you have done—nothing you have *ever* done—has forfeited your place with me."

I wonder what Peter would have done, or said, if someone else had confronted him about that night, or if Jesus had spoken to him with a voice of accusation. Even if Peter was self-conscious about his own wrongdoing, I'll bet he was also ready to recite all the ways it was not his fault. He might have been ready to say to Jesus, "You left without telling us what was happening." Or "The others ran away first. I was the *last* one to leave!" "What did you *expect* me to do?" he might have asked defensively if Jesus had given him the chance.

Jesus didn't ignore what he and Peter both knew had happened. He didn't pretend that no crack had appeared in their friendship. He didn't say, "It's OK" in a way that let Peter immediately off the hook. He asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" He uncovered--brought out into plain sight--Peter's three-time denial of him in the courtyard. He knew there was forgiveness work, relationship re-building work, still to be done.

But Jesus also didn't pound Peter over the head with his failure, the way we're sometimes afraid God might want to use our inadequacy to pound us into submission. That's just not God's way. I am convinced that the only way God ever punishes us is by letting us face the consequences of our own actions, our own mis-directed desires. When our defenses are gone, when we are ready and able to take responsibility for our own failures, our actions gone wrong, our desires run amok, then we can claim the forgiveness that is right there waiting for us.

Only when we are ready to un-bury our regrets—when we allow them to come to the surface and teach us something; when they are freed from all those layers of defensiveness and explanation, projection and blame, and sometimes their blankets of humor, can they be seen and healed—forgiven. Only then can we begin to live fully, wholly, freely.

I heard a professor say once that on the first day of a class he taught college freshmen, he often asked them, "What do you want to be able to say about your life when you're 80?" And consistently, every year, the most popular answer was this: "I want to be able to say I have no regrets."

Who gets to 80 without having any regrets? What kind of life have you lived if you can say that? Maybe we are afraid of living with regrets—or of taking risks that might cause us some regret—because we have mistakenly begun to believe that we can live our lives in a way that we will never need forgiveness. That we can self-improve so completely that we can repair our flaws, or at least prevent them from appearing in public without makeup.

But forgiveness—knowing we have been forgiven—is the only thing that can make and keep us humble. The need for forgiveness—that pattern of falling down and standing up, falling down and standing up again—is what, in some way, makes us human. And it is the currency of God's love, the grace that most clearly reminds us that we don't always earn what we have been given.

I have a friend who defines forgiveness as "giving up hope for a better past." Forgiveness sees and acknowledges that every one of us is flawed and broken. Forgiveness knows that the past cannot be undone, and still the future is full of promise, of hope.

I sat at lunch a few days ago with a group that included two women who talked openly about the fact that each of them had worked as a prostitute. They could talk about it because they are different now; because the people at a place called Thistle Farms, in Nashville, Tennessee took them in and loved them without judgment, healed them into new life. There is a freedom, a liberation of heart and soul, that comes when you can admit that you've been picked up off the ground, where you were pretty much flat on your face.

“Do not be afraid,” our God says to us. Do not be afraid of living with a past that cannot be changed or re-written, or paralyzed by the possibility of making a mistake. Do not be afraid to be a person who has been forgiven and will need forgiveness again. There is plenty of grace for all of us.