

“Come, Follow Me: Failure”

Luke 22:54-62

We are always fascinated by stories of important people who fall from grace. Take the recent story of Prince Andrew and how he got stripped of his titles because of his involvement with Epstein. We watch in horror and great curiosity when these stories take place because they remind us that no one is above making poor choices and falling for evil. We would like to think that only bad people do bad things, but in reality, most of us under certain circumstance of pressure, weakness, or fear might find ourselves falling into bad behaviors.

This is illustrated in the children’s show, Scooby-Doo, where the gang of teenagers and their dog Scooby-Doo often find themselves trying to solve a mystery and to catch a villain who presented themselves as a ghost, a witch, or a ghoul. But in every episode, the villain once unmasked turned out to be the person they never expected. The villain was often a nice person who was just driven by fear, jealousy, or control. Here is a little taste of these villains who hid behind scary masks because they were ordinary people: <https://youtu.be/yqrkkaFREtg>.

The lesson is clear: Everyone is vulnerable to making big mistakes. None of us are immune! The good news is that we have biblical characters who failed and yet were redeemed by God’s love. We have been looking at the discipleship of Peter. He is presented as the Rock upon which Christ was building his church. You can’t get any more solid than that! Peter is the enthusiastic disciple who puts it all on the line. He is the one to first confess Jesus as the Messiah. He was the one to walk on water with Jesus. He was to see Jesus transfigured. He was the one who claimed that he would never betray or deny Jesus. But when a time of great fear came upon him with the arrest of Jesus, the pressure was too great to bear. When he faced his own death by the Romans, he was terrified and thus denied Jesus three times.

Peter fell short when it really mattered. When Jesus looked at him and their eyes met, he felt his failure and shame. He cried bitterly as failure and betrayal cut through his self-illusions of power, loyalty, and faith. He was no better than Judas! He continued to follow Jesus, but this time was from distance and without the boldness he had before. Yet, Peter’s story of failure became so important to the followers of Jesus. It was recorded in all four Gospels. In Jerusalem, there is a church dedicated to this part of the story of Peter. It is called The Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu. The last word comes from the Latin for “cock’s crow.” That church is dedicated to remembering the spot where Peter denied Jesus.

So how do we see ourselves in this story? Our failures may not be as glorious or noteworthy as Prince Andrew’s or Peter’s denial of Jesus, but every disciple no matter how faithful, has to learn to deal with failure. It is an essential part of the journey. The normal ways for dealing with failure are either denying it or letting it annihilate us. We can pretend that we are always right, or we can lose heart and feel that we are not worthy. Either way, we miss the point! The point is that as disciples we know that we need our

teacher to guide us and to help us along the way. Our egos tell us that we can be independent, moral, or brilliant on our own, but the truth of God's grace is that our failures can become the places where God's grace enters in new ways into our hearts.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, [failure] or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide to not love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds...From the beginning of my life, two voices have been speaking to me: one saying, Henri, be sure you make it on your own. Be sure you become an independent person. Be sure I can be proud of you, and another voice saying, Henri, whatever you are going to do, even if you don't do anything very interesting in the eyes of the world, be sure you stay close to the heart of Jesus; be sure you stay close to the love of God."

In Rembrandt's famous painting, "The Denial of Saint Peter" (image) shows how distraught Peter was. At the same time, we see Jesus look at Peter. In the painting, no facial expression is portrayed, just Jesus' gaze falling on Peter. Even though Jesus knew that Peter was not strong enough to withstand the fear of the crucifixion, he still looked at him without judgment. This is a powerful reminder of how God looks at us and sees us, even in the worst moments. Our discipleship always includes failure. The key is to always remember to stay close to Christ's look of gaze of love.

Video: A Celebration of Grace

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/a-celebration-of-grace>