



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 2, 2017

"Relentless Grace" - Luke 22:54-62

The Rev. Steve Peich

Luke 22:54-62 ⁵⁴ Then seizing Jesus, they led Him away and took Him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. ⁵⁵ But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.

⁵⁶ A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with Him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know Him," he said. ⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with Him, for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.

⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown Me three times."

⁶² And Peter went outside and wept bitterly.

A couple of years ago I did something for the first time: a memorial service for a pet dog. Now that is something they never teach you in seminary, but it did get me thinking about why pet dogs are so important to us.

One thing I realized is that pets are an amazing medicine for the common feelings of loneliness and rejection. I would often hang out with my own dog, sitting in the backyard when days got a little tough or I felt hurt or overwhelmed by others. And that crazy dog always put a smile on my face no matter how bad things were.

The famous physician, theologian, musician Albert Schweitzer once said, "There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and pets." And there is a lot of scientific research now that proves him right.

But as I thought more about it, one of the deeper things that I realized is that pet dogs embody grace so profoundly. That may sound odd, but I really think it is one of the reasons why we get so emotionally and soulfully connected to them like family.

Think about it. My dog never needs me to be impressive, attractive, have a slim waist or big muscles. And I never have to come up with a great sermon or wear nice clothes. He forgives me very easily even when I'm grumpy. He just wants to be with me however *un-impressive* or sinful I am. In fact, I noticed he was affectionate with me even when I'm at my worst. If that is not a good

description of grace...I don't know what is.

Then another thought occurred to me. This is a lot like how God wants us to be with each other, isn't it? Just think how vital it is to your emotional, soulful, and relational well being to live with others who are gracious with all your imperfections, shortcomings, and sin?

One of the reasons why grace is so vital to the human condition is because the lack of it often leads to things like shame, hostility, and relational breakdown, etc. The very things Jesus came to change and heal. Without a *regular* experience of grace we end up walking this life as soulful cripples.

Today I want to reflect on this issue of grace and it's corresponding opposite: shame. And I want to do this looking through the lens of the story of an apostle named Simon Peter.

If you are not familiar with Simon Peter, he was a fisherman in Israel during the first century and was one of the first guys Jesus chose to follow Him on His world-changing mission.

Peter was a man of tremendous passion and zeal for God. In fact, more than a few times he boldly claimed how he'd die for Jesus.

For example, at the Last Supper when Jesus warned Peter about his upcoming failure, Jesus said: Luke 22:31-33 ³¹ *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”* ³² *“But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”*

And check out Peter’s reply: ³³ *“But Peter replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’”* You can just hear his passion.

The gospel of Mark adds these words to Peter’s mouth in this scene. Mark 14:29-31 ²⁹ *“Peter declared, ‘Even if all fall away, I will not.’”* ³⁰ *“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “Today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”* ³¹ *“But Peter insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’”* And all the others said the same.

When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane Peter even became violent for the sake of Christ. Luke 22:47-50 ⁴⁹ *“When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’”* ⁵⁰ *“And one of them (Peter) struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.”*

So here you have this sword swinging, swashbuckling, passionate, zealous Peter living out his promise not only to die for Jesus, but also even kill for Him. Yet, as we just read, when Jesus was on trial the great, passionate, committed Peter denied he even knew Christ three times. And after that third time Jesus looked right at Peter, and Peter collapsed into a wailing, sobbing mess.

Anyone been there? Zealous for God one minute and completely

blow it the next? Having a quiet time one minute and ten minutes later railing on your kids? Courageous one day, scared stiff the next? Full of confidence yesterday, then full of shame today etc.? Anyone know that kind of experience?

This is why I like the stories of Peter—because they are so much like the story of me.

What really strikes me about this scene is verse 61. Right at the point of disowning Jesus for the third time Jesus looked straight at Peter. Wow, what did that feel like? I don’t think it was a scowl, but it must have felt profoundly disturbing because of how Peter responds. The word, “wept” here in the original language of the New Testament, doesn’t simply mean to cry. It means to weep or wail. The emphasis is not so much on the action of crying, but on the noise of the crying.

Then on top of that it says adverbially he wept bitterly. Bitterly, here means to do something with mental agony, anguish, and suffering. In other words, something deeply psychologically distressing is happening.

What you see in this moment is a vivid portrait of shame. Peter experiences the shame of epic failure. Anyone know the kind of shame that comes with failure? He also experiences the shame of living in contradiction to the very good things he valued so highly.

I saw this all the time when I worked with Christian men who struggled with pornography. None of these guys valued what they did. They valued holiness and faithfulness to God and their spouses. But their souls were in bitter agony because they lived in

such contradiction to the things they valued so much. Shame does that to us.

Unfortunately, the world we live in is loaded with shame opportunities and shame messages. If there is one thing you learn early in life is that people are lousy at living with the imperfections of others.

I remember as a kid, I was mercilessly teased about my teeth (I had a large gap between my two front teeth. I looked like Michael Strahan). Even as an adult it would often be the subject of laughter.

When I was a youth pastor I remember one teenager coming up to me, pointing at my mouth and asking me, “Are you going to get that fixed? The first thing a person notices about you is the gap in your teeth.” (She had the gift of encouragement). These kinds of experiences led me to wonder, if people will make that big a deal about my imperfect teeth what will they do when they see my bigger imperfections? That’s what creates shame in us, that kind of fear.

Here’s reality folks, we are built, we are hard-wired by God to experience grace in order to function well as a human being. And when we don’t experience grace *regularly* it is a quick step to some degree of shame, which is what I think Peter is feeling in v. 61.

Let me drill down more into this issue of shame because it is so common and paralyzing. Shame, at its core, is having an internalized sense of being unworthy of acceptance and love. Shame is that gnawing feeling that you are not worthy of love and connection unless you do something or have something “worth loving.”

People with shame feel like damaged goods. They have a deep core belief that they are not good enough. They feel they are defective, deficient, inadequate, and in some way, disgraceful and unlovable.

How many of us walk around with a constant, nagging feeling of “I’m still not good enough?” You are plagued with the feeling that you’re no one *until* you are able to achieve more, or hit a home run in everything you do, or when *everyone* thinks your awesome or likes you, etc.

As I said, people with shame feel deep in their subconscious, “Something about me makes me unworthy of connection and if you find out what that is, you’ll disconnect from me.”

This is why shame is so destructive to the human condition. The scriptures and science show us that we are divinely and neurologically hard-wired for connection. This is why, in part, the Great Commandment is what it is: to love God and others as we love ourselves. It’s all about relationship, love and connection. Why? Because human connection gives us purpose and meaning and joy for our lives, and when we don’t experience it we suffer immensely soulfully and relationally.

One reason we live with a constant gnawing of anxiety and distrust of others is because we instinctively know or have had much experience with people who do not act like Jesus when we are broken, weak, and sinful, or have a lousy gap in our teeth.

So for people who feel that shame, the world always feels a little unsafe to be completely real, transparent, open and honest with others. Thus, it makes us want to

hide. If not hide a lot, then at least hide a little.

But here’s the problem with that, when we hide we are not fully known. And as you have heard me say before, it is hard to feel fully loved unless you are fully known. And this is exactly what love does and what grace does: it frees the human soul to live fully in its truth warts and all, and still experience love, compassion, and mercy.

When I counsel people I always begin with a prayer for courage to speak openly about all that is weighing on their heart and soul. But here’s the deal, this can only happen if they truly know they are surrounded by grace. Without grace people will hide their pain, they won’t be fully open about their pain. And as I have said many times before, what stays hidden stays hurting. For someone to become open they need to be sure that grace is in the room.

So here’s the deal, when we don’t regularly experience grace we can fall into all kinds of funky ways of living. For example, when we don’t experience much grace we can become very driven people.

Years ago when I was a new teacher at the Bible Institute of Hawaii, we sometimes flew in this retired minister from Tennessee to teach a few classes. As he got to know me, he saw I often looked distressed or in a hurry at work. So he began asking me about all the hard work I was putting into teaching. As he listened to me he said, “I can see that you don’t just want to do things well, you want to excel at *everything*.”

When he said this, I looked at him with a surprised look and said,

“Of course. Isn’t that what everyone wants?” He just shook his head and laughed because he knew that if I continued as I was, I would be burned out in a few years. But that is what the fear of not being good enough can do to people—it can make them very driven.

This is part of the reason why shame can also make us perfectionists. Anyone struggle with perfectionism? Let me give you one researcher’s definition of perfectionism. “Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: “If I look perfect, live perfectly, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.” (Brene Brown). This is the destructive and faulty logic of perfectionism.

So for me, when I was a younger minister, my faulty internal logic went like this. If I want people to know God and come to church it was only logical that my sermons and leadership had to be *perfect*. And when I was a teacher at the Bible Institute of Hawaii, if I wanted well-attended classes then my work had to be *perfect*. Why? Because if they are not perfect then I will have small classes and small classes would be a sign that I’m inadequate as a teacher.

Here is something you will never see in life: a perfectionist at rest. You cannot hold the words, perfectionist and rest, in the same sentence.

Listen to spiritual writer Richard Rohr as he comments on this very thing. “We’ve all imbibed the culture of unrest so deeply. What got me into men’s work is that I find males are especially driven in that direction.

We just cannot believe that we could be respected or admired or received or loved without some level of performance. We are all performers and overachievers, and we think ‘when we do that’ we will finally be lovable.” (Richard Rohr)

This is the *great lie* of perfectionism and shame. And this is why it is so crucial that we Christians are people of grace because we help others find rest from trying to “overprove” themselves to the world. We help people heal from the madness of seeking to justify their existence by proving their validity (yet again) to be loved and embraced. Grace expresses you’re valid enough simply because you are a sacred child of God. Period!

Not only can shame make us perfectionists, shame can also make us defensive. I have seen many times where someone says something small like, “I can’t believe you didn’t do the dishes like I asked.” It’s really just a very simple statement. But the other person responds with, “You know, I can never make you happy!” That sentiment of “I can’t make people happy” is the sentiment of shame. Since we don’t like feeling that, we then throw it back on the other person. In other words, we think by that comment to us they are shaming us, they are nailing us. So we then blame *them* for being impossible to please. “It’s not me, it’s you. *You’re* impossible to please.” Anyone been there?

You see when people who struggle with shame hear critique or correction they don’t hear something they can grow from or a way to become better. Shame interprets good input as a put down; they hear it as scolding, as personal criticism. And so they are quick to become defensive.

Shame can also make us people pleasers. Saying “yes” when we should say “no” simply because we are driven to keep at bay the real possibility that someone will be *disappointed* in us. And we can’t deal with a disappointing face or voice because if they are disappointed in us it just verifies our innate sense of being unworthy of connection. If we see a disappointed face we think, “You don’t like me, so you are going to leave me.”

Shame also makes us adverse to risk, and thus paralyzes our potential for achievement. You see, if we risk taking the next step up professionally, we risk failure or rejection. And failure, as we saw with Peter, is like a nuclear bomb of shame because failure or rejection will affirm, yet again, we are inadequate.

Shame also makes us liars and deceivers. I remember how one time, when I was a younger pastor, my district superintendent called me up while I was eating dinner with my family and he asked, “Steve, when are you coming for dinner? My wife made a special meal.” In that moment I realized I had totally forgotten about going to his house for a dinner. So what did I do? I told him I was running late. I, Rev. Steve Peich, lied through my teeth! Why? Because I felt so embarrassed that I had forgotten, and embarrassment is a shade of shame. Shame makes us liars and deceivers.

One last thing about what shame can cause. Shame can make us harsh—even violent.

When I was 13 years old I got suspended for being drunk at school. My older brother picked me up and drove me home from school. When I got home and I came to the front door, my mother

slapped me all over the place. She kept yelling the same phrase again and again, “How dare you *disgrace* the family name!” The demeaning cuss words that came out of her mouth to a 13-year-old child would curl your hair!

The thing I want you to notice is that her first response to my drunken stupor was not, “Why in the world are you drinking alcohol?” Or even, “Are you crazy to be drinking at 13?!”

But her first response was, “How can you *disgrace* our family?!” And that’s the opposite of grace, isn’t it? It’s disgrace. And disgrace means shame. You see, that’s what drove my mother to beat me and demean me, because she felt shame. Shame can move us to harshness and violence.

Now part of the cure to all our shame (and to Peter’s shame) is to experience real grace. Grace is a lot of things, but at its core it’s about expressing unconditional love *in the face of* real failure, wrongdoing, sin, shortcomings, and imperfection, etc.

As unconditional love, grace seeks the good and well-being of another *independently of* what they do or fail to do (David Brondos). It’s that thing that says “Yes, I see you blew it, but I love you anyway.”

Now let me be clear, grace *doesn’t mean* we don’t repent and deal with our sin and ask for forgiveness. God is dead serious about sin so we need to deal with it. But it does mean, no matter how far we are from God’s intentions for our lives, grace says we have not moved one inch from his love and value of us—even in *the worst* moments of our life (as it was with Peter).

Think of how much soulful peace and rest comes as people experience that fundamental truth from God.

Now I know for some of you, other people have profoundly hurt you. So hearing all this stuff about being gracious may not sound too inspiring. After all, stats show that one out of four women in this country have been abused, so we likely have such folks here with us this morning.

If you have been deeply hurt by another, grace is not an easy thing to express. But I want to make this very clear, never feel like you have to silence, mask, or deny your real pain in order to be gracious. Grace does *not* arise from someone who minimizes his or her real pain in life, but it arises from one who truly faces the pain and walks through it. Processing pain helps you get to that place of grace and forgiveness, not by stuffing down that pain.

Many years ago, I was deeply hurt by some folks in ministry just before I had returned to seminary for further studies. While there, I met with a retired Presbyterian minister named Don Hawthorne. Don was now a spiritual director. A spiritual director is not like a therapist, where you present a problem or issue to the therapist and they help you work toward solving that.

A spiritual director is one who walks and prays with you with an eye to your spiritual journey with God. They are asking questions like, "Where and how do you experience God's presence? Where and how do you experience His absence? How is God changing you? Where are you resisting this change and why? What are the obstacles to God's work in you? etc."

When I was so crushed in spirit and so angry I would often bring it up to Don.

And here's the thing, no matter how often I brought up my hurt and anger, Don did not even for one minute intimate to me, "You know Steve, you're a Christian and you really need to forgive those guys." He would just hear me express my anger and hurt and would trust the process with God. He would just say, "It's okay. Let's pray about it again." He was so gracious.

In allowing me to face and walk through my pain (and not just telling me what the Bible says about unforgiveness), I truly became a different man and a different kind of minister. In fact, out of that experience I was able to plant a church in a new way because I became a different man of grace. Eventually I did forgive those folks, but I got there through processing pain, not denying it.

So again, grace does not arise from someone who minimizes pain, but from one who truly faces and processes pain.

Furthermore, let me make something else clear about what grace doesn't mean. Grace does *not mean* there is no discipline or correction or confrontation that needs to happen. That would be enabling, which is dysfunctional and unhealthy. Grace does not enable bad behavior or severe mistakes. Sometimes even with grace there will be consequences to our choices and actions.

For example, if I borrow your car and drive it into a tree and smash it to pieces, you may forgive me, but what will remain as a consequence? A smashed car! That doesn't go away with all the grace in the world.

So again, grace does not mean the avoidance or absence of discipline or confrontation, but what grace does mean is that there is no condemnation. Romans 8.1 says that, "There is now, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That's great news, but there's plenty of discipline and plenty of correction and often consequences for those who are in Christ Jesus. And there is discipline and correction, not because Jesus enjoys being mean, but because Jesus is committed to our well-being and wholeness. He wants us to experience the abundant life and sometimes discipline is necessary to get us there.

Let me say a quick word about Christian discipline. Christian discipline is restorative in nature, not punitive. Punishment seeks to inflict pain. Discipline seeks to inflict character, wisdom, and maturity. And this is why grace is a crucial element as we seek to discipline others. Grace works as a cushion to keep discipline from plunging down into condemnation and punishment.

It's like what we do with our kids. If our discipline is not infused with grace then it may be experienced simply as punishment. If so, then a child can get buried in shame, as well as relational fear. But when grace-infused discipline is used as a means to improve our child, to restore our child to something better, or to reconcile the relational problem that is now created with the child, then discipline has a whole different outcome to it. Grace helps the child feel the love of the parent even in the moments of discipline.

And why do we give out discipline? Because real unconditional love requires it.

As one writer put it, "Love cannot ignore things that are self-destructive in the loved one..." (David Benner). This is one of the reasons why we see Jesus strongly correcting people at times, people whom He dearly loves and for whom He will die. A God who loves us unconditionally cannot passively accept our insistence on harming ourselves or other people. What healthy parent would do that?

One more thing grace doesn't mean. It doesn't mean you don't keep boundaries with people, and it doesn't mean you trust someone who is untrustworthy. Jesus loved people to the point of dying for them, but He did not always trust them and that was a wise thing to do. Graciousness does not mean we check our wisdom at the door.

Now let's finish our story of Peter. The last we saw of Peter he was weeping in shame. Two days after that Friday night Jesus rose from the dead and visits His disciples. The gospel of John records that Sunday evening this way.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ after He said this, He showed them His hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

*²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, so I send you."
²² when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "receive the Holy Spirit."*

Notice that Jesus does not meet up with these spiritual and relational failures and say, "I'm back. I'm mad. And I'm taking

names." In fact, I never see this in any of the resurrection stories of the gospels. Instead Jesus speaks *peace* to these deserters. He speaks *grace* and *purpose* and *mission* to these fearful failures.

Remember our definition of grace? "Grace is about expressing unconditional love *in the face of* real failure, wrongdoing, sin, shortcomings, and imperfection. Grace seeks the good and well-being of another *independently of* what they do or fail to do." Do you see Jesus doing that here in John 20?

Think about it for a minute, how much repentance goes on before Jesus extends peace and gives grace to the disciples? No one has yet to ask for forgiveness; no one has yet to repent.

Let me be clear, I'm *not* saying asking for forgiveness or repenting is not necessary for us to follow Jesus. It's absolutely necessary. But my point is it isn't necessary *for Him* to love us. Jesus sought them out even before He heard one word of repentance.

One of the things this scene shows me is this. God is *relentless* in His love and grace toward us even in our worst moments of life. He doesn't want to come in and bust heads, but He wants to come in and give you love, and grace, and mercy, and healing. This scene emphasizes so clearly that no matter how sinful or disappointing we may be we remain the great desire of His heart.

So my question for you is this, do you know that relentless love and grace today? And if you do, can you extend it to others? What would this world be like if we Christians, could give love and grace like that?

Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com