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*“A God of Second Chances”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 21:4-17

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In a previous life, when John and I sold food products, we would sometimes invite our most important customers to come to Cape Cod and enjoy some of the wonderful things this little part of the world has to offer: like all the sights, and golf and fishing. Well, one day we took some customers and chartered a fishing boat out of Rock Harbor in Orleans, and the Captain headed up toward Provincetown so the men could try their luck at catching some striped bass. Well, somewhere about a half-mile off P'town, we noticed a man in a small boat diving for lobsters. Which was fun to watch. With all his scuba gear on, he would jump into the water and then a few moments later come up with a handful of lobsters which he put into his boat. The captain of our boat explained that there was a big drop off where the man was diving, and the lobsters, feeding on the bottom, would somehow end up congregating along the wall of that under water cliff, making it easy for this diver to pluck them up to sell. What a way to make a living I thought. It had to be hard and dangerous. Yes, the weather was beautiful that day. But what about those harsh, cold and windy days? And what about those great white sharks that always seem to be lurking about. And, of course there are all those inherent dangers in diving alone. I thought of all those things, but the possibility of him being swallowed up by a whale, never crossed my mind. But that's apparently what happened to Michael Packard, 56 years old, of Wellfleet – swallowed whole by a humpback whale. Who knows, could he be the same man I saw some 30 years ago? Here's his story according to the Cape Cod Times. “All of a sudden, I felt this huge shove and the next thing I knew it was completely black,” Packard recalled following his release from Cape Cod Hospital. At first, Packard thought he was inside a great white shark, but he couldn't feel any teeth and he hadn't suffered any obvious wounds. It quickly dawned on him, though, that he had been swallowed by a whale. “I could sense it was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing me with the muscles in his mouth. I was completely inside; it was completely black,” Packard said. “I thought to myself, ‘There's no way I'm getting out of here. I'm done, I'm dead.’ All I could think of was my boys — they're 12 and 15 years old.” Outfitted in his scuba gear, he struggled and the whale began shaking its head so Packard could tell the whale didn't like it. He estimated he was in the whale for 30 to 40 seconds before the whale finally surfaced. “I saw light, and he started throwing his head side to side, and the next thing I knew I was outside (in the water).”

Now some have said they're skeptical of his story, but most, including me, believe it. And this story of Michael and the whale certainly makes the story of Jonah and the whale a lot more convincing, doesn't it? But my intent today is not to compare Mr. Packard's ordeal to that of Jonah's, but rather, for us to consider more broadly the gift that Mr. Packard received. You see, Packard was knocking on death's door. He was inside the mouth of a whale, fully conscious, aware of a gruesome death that was about to befall him. But instead of death, he was given the gift of a second chance. He is now living to talk, and even laugh, about his experience. Think about it for a moment. If you were given a second chance like that, would it affect your life going forward?

You see, a second chance is no small thing. And that's what our Scripture lesson is about today. The disciple Peter getting a second chance. So let's talk about Peter for a minute. If we know anything about him, we know through Scripture that he was somewhat obstinate and impulsive and difficult to control. It actually came to a head on the night of the Last Supper. He protested to Jesus, "You will never wash my feet," and Jesus had to reprimand him. Later he boasted, "I will never desert you," and Jesus warned him what would happen. Then later, he pulled out a sword and chopped the ear off one of the men trying to arrest Jesus. And Jesus had to admonish him... again. That's the thing about us mortals. It always seems to be about us. For whatever reason, our human nature instinctively finds ways of turning the focus in on ourselves, persuading us to worship that little god within, instead of the one true God. You can call it pride or self-righteousness or desire to be in control. But our massive human egos often convince us that we know more, know better than God. Perhaps this was what Peter was thinking – that he knew more than Jesus. But we all know what happened. Shortly before dawn on that fateful night, when challenged by a servant girl, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, declaring again and again, "I do not know the man." And the night ends with Peter, previously nicknamed the "Rock" by Jesus, weeping like a baby in the darkness when he realizes this was exactly what Jesus predicted would happen. His ego and pride and self-righteousness destroyed. No longer a rock, more like sinking sand. Feeling guilty because he didn't do what he knew Jesus wanted him to do – acknowledge him, follow him, love him.

You know, years ago there was a movement, that went by the letters, WWJD. It was an abbreviation for the words, "What Would Jesus Do." Basically it was to encourage people to make their personal decisions based on what they thought Jesus would do. Would Jesus drive a Honda Accord or a Lexus? Mmmm, I don't know. He might drive a Chevy Bolt, but I'm not Jesus, and I really would rather have

the comfort of a Lexus. Or, would Jesus live in a 3,000 square foot house, or would he live in a condo? Mmmm. I don't know. He might live in a tiny house, but I really want a big kitchen and a nice deck and room for guests. Maybe that's why the movement eventually faded away. Because most of us wouldn't do what Jesus would do. I think that a better way to have put the question is, "What would Jesus have me do?" "What would Jesus have me do?" Think about that. The onus is no longer on Jesus, but it is now on us. What would Jesus have me do?

But back to Peter. He is now approached by Jesus. And here... is his second chance. When Jesus puts to him the question, "Do you love me?" Bishop J. C. Ryle said, "'Do you love Me', may seem at first like a simple question. In one sense it is so. Even a child can understand love, and can say whether he loves another or not. Yet 'Do you love Me' is, in reality, a very searching question. We may know much, and do much, and profess much, and talk much, and work much, and give much, and go through much, and make much show in our religion, and yet be dead before God, from lack of love. Do we love Christ? That is the great question." And Jesus puts this question directly to Peter. "Do you love me?" Three times, he asked Peter, "Do you love me?" The same number of times Peter denied Jesus. "Do you love me," searching his heart. Calling him into the divine life. Each time Peter answers in the affirmative, telling Jesus, "You know all things. You know that I love you." "You know all things. You know that I love you." And Jesus' response each time is, "Then feed my sheep." "Then take care of my sheep."

For us, the message is clear. If we truly do love Christ, then we show our love for him, by loving others. By taking care of his sheep, taking care of one another. And on this note I'm going to end with another story from our recent trip to Florida. We planned to spend our last day on the east coast of Florida, so we drove from Fort Myers Beach over to Fort Lauderdale to explore what is known as the Gold Coast of Florida. And we decided to take a drive up Route A1A to explore the different beach towns like Hollywood, Fort Lauderdale Beach, Lauderdale by the Sea, Pompano Beach, Deerfield Beach, Boca Raton, Delray Beach, and Palm Beach. Somewhere around Pompano Beach we noticed an elderly black man walking north, slowly along the roadway. It was hot and humid outside, over 90°, and we just passed him by. Then we stopped for a couple of hours for lunch around Deerfield Beach, and then continued north toward Boca. That's when we saw the same man again. Hours later, still walking in the hot sun. Mmmm. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus do? Well, he would definitely stop and help the man. But we're on vacation, and some people had told us about a very nice

beach bar up ahead we wanted to go to. BUT... BUT... What would Jesus have me do? What would he have me do? That's why I chose today's Scripture. Because the words, "Do you love me?... then take care of my sheep," rang out in my mind. So we made a U-turn and John got out and talked to the man. He was in very poor shape, disoriented, thirsty, and for whatever reason barely able to communicate due to a physical impairment. I guess we could've called the police to handle the situation, but for some reason the Spirit called us to see this through. I asked him if he had any identification on him, and he handed me a crumpled up Medicaid card. Paul was his name. He was just released that morning from Broward County Hospital and he had some papers with his diagnosis and just his street name and city. He also had a prescription for some antibiotics. No wallet, no money, no phone. We stopped at CVS and got his medicine and two big jugs of water and then proceeded to find his house. The neighborhood wasn't the best, and all eyes turned toward us, two white people driving slowly through an all-black neighborhood. It actually turned out it was a black, Haitian neighborhood. All we had was the street, no number, but on that street we saw a group of people standing there talking, so John asked them if they recognized the poor gentleman in our back seat. Thankfully, they did. We explained that we had found Paul up toward Boca. His friends and neighbors took him from us, embracing him, embracing us, and blessing us over and over again for the very simple thing we had done. Which was answering Jesus question, "Do you love me?" by taking care of one of his sheep.

I'm guessing that in our fallen world we will always hear more self-centered cries of, "You will never wash my feet," and "I do not know the man," then there will be God-centered affirmations that state, "You know all things," and "You know that I love you." But the lesson for us is that if you have ever passed by an opportunity to feed or take care of one of Jesus' sheep, like all of us have done at one time or another, - and in retrospect, feel guilty - remember this: we have a God of second chances. Second chances again and again and again and again. Amen