

5-11-25 Sermon: “Damaged Goods” – John 21 and Acts 9

The God we worship has a preference, it seems, for disciples that might otherwise be considered “damaged goods.”

Take Peter, for instance. Jesus calls him “the Rock,” the foundation on which the church will be built. And yet, in Jesus’ moment of greatest need, Peter abandons his Lord and denies him three times.

Or how about Paul? He’s the great missionary, the Apostle to the Gentiles, the author of much of the New Testament. But, as we heard in today’s reading from Acts, he begins his career as Saul the Persecutor, the number one enemy of the church, who spends his time, quote, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.”

These are the people that God chooses to lead the early church. We just heard their call and commission stories. Because, as it turns out, God does not seek out bright and shiny people to do the work of the Gospel. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is much more interested in flawed and broken people; these stories reveal a divine preference for working with damaged goods.

It’s an ill-advised preference, to be sure; it goes against all conventional wisdom. But friends, this is good news for us. Because I don’t know about you, but these days I am acutely aware that I, too, am damaged goods.

I meant to preach this sermon to you last week, of course; these Scriptures are last week’s lectionary texts. But, last Saturday, I woke up with a sore throat and was getting ready to go sing with 60 of my closest friends. So I thought, “You know, I haven’t stuck anything up my nose for a while, I should probably take a COVID test.” And lo and behold... two little lines appeared! Y’all, I’ve been taking a lot of one-or-two-line tests recently...and suffice it to say *that* was not the second line I was looking for!

Even in 2025, there is nothing like COVID to make you feel like damaged goods! Let me tell you, people *run* from you! They avoid you like the plague...because oh wait, you *have* the plague! It’s like a zombie apocalypse, but *you’re* the zombie!

But what I realized, reflecting on these texts with a Bible in one hand and a positive COVID test in the other, is that the reason the distance and avoidance cut so deep is because they tap into my own fear that I am fundamentally broken and unworthy. Perhaps you live with that fear, too. I am deeply aware of my flaws. I know how many times I have tried and failed to follow Jesus; if I’m honest, I know how often I fail to even try! Call me a Calvinist, but I know that I am damaged goods.

I suspect this is how Peter feels that morning on the beach. Peter is painfully aware that he has let Jesus down. When Jesus asks him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” the text even tells us that Peter was hurt by the question. Perhaps he remembered the last time someone asked him the same question three times: “You are one of Jesus’ disciples, are you not?” And three times Peter said, “No, I do not know the man.”

There’s an obvious parallel between this morning’s reading and the story of Peter’s denial. Jesus chooses to meet Peter *in* his brokenness, to redeem him right at the place of his betrayal. Three times, Peter denied Jesus. So three times, Jesus invites him to affirm his love. And three times, Jesus gives the commission: Feed my sheep.

God chooses to transform the world using people who are damaged goods.

This is good news for us, but it is also hard news. Isn’t it? Because we are surrounded by deniers and persecutors and people who do all kinds of evil. One can hardly turn on the news

these days without hearing about something unspeakably horrible being done, often in God's name, often using American tax dollars!

God's preference for damaged goods is hard news, if we take it seriously, because it means that any one of our enemies – any one of these people inflicting harm in our world – might be a Peter or Paul in the making. If repentance really is available to all people – even Paul the persecutor! – that means we cannot write anyone off as “too far gone,” or fully and irrevocably evil. And I'll tell you, there are some people these days that I find it *very* hard not to write off.

After Jesus appears to Saul on the road, he also comes in a vision to a disciple named Ananias, who lives in Damascus. He tells him to go and find Saul and to lay hands on him to restore his sight. And Ananias protests, “Lord, do you not remember that this guy has been trying to kill us?” But God says, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the people.”

So Ananias goes, and he lays his hands on Saul. With fear and trembling, he calls the number one enemy of the church “Brother Saul.” And so Paul the Persecutor becomes Paul the Apostle. And once again, God chooses to work with damaged goods.

There is great vulnerability on display here. Great willingness to get hurt. On the part of Ananias, but also on the part of God.

Going back to Peter's story, I find myself sort of transfixed by Jesus' own vulnerability in this interaction. Notice, Jesus doesn't call him by the nickname he gave him, “Peter;” he goes back to his formal name, “Simon, son of John.” It seems Peter is not the only one whose feelings have been hurt; we can hear a little sting in Jesus' voice, too, as he tries to sort out where he and Peter stand.

And then there's the question itself: Simon, son of John, *do you love me?*

What a question! I've asked that question before – have you? And on those days when I doubt my own worthiness or goodness, I find great comfort in the fact that even Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior of humankind, asks for reaffirmation and reassurance from a friend who has let him down. Friends, this is incarnation at its finest; a shocking picture of God-made-flesh pleading, searching, “Do you love me?”¹ Jesus risks being rejected – having his heart broken open – by an imperfect disciple who has let him down once already.

But *of course* that's what Jesus does. Because Jesus, too, comes to us in his risen glory as damaged goods.

Remember last week's lesson, where Thomas asked to see the holes in Jesus' hand and side? The Risen Christ appears to his disciples – appears to *us* – as a body broken. We meet our Lord with his scars intact. Scars that resemble our scars, brokenness that mirrors our brokenness. Damaged goods, all around.

This is the way of Lord. So let us give thanks, and love one another – even and *especially* from our broken places. Amen.

¹ Lisa E. Dahill, “John 21:15-19: Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting Gospels*, John Vol. 2, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox: 2015) p. 346.