

**I am Going Fishing**  
**May 1, 2022**  
**John 21:1-19**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

On January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1986, as the nation mourned the loss of seven astronauts on the space shuttle Challenger, Bob Ebeling was steeped in his own deep grief.

The night before the launch, Ebeling and four other engineers at NASA contractor Morton Thiokol had tried to stop the launch. But their managers and NASA overruled them. That night, he told his wife, Darlene, "It's going to blow up."

When Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff, Ebeling and his colleagues sat stunned in a conference room at Thiokol's headquarters outside Brigham City, Utah. They watched the spacecraft explode on a giant television screen and they knew exactly what had happened.

Initially Ebeling and another engineer independently contacted NPR and shared anonymously their roles in the tragedy. "I was one of the few that was really close to the situation," Ebeling recalls. "Had they listened to me and waited for a weather change, it might have been a completely different outcome."

The NPR reporter and Ebeling spoke in the same house, kitchen and living room that they at spoke in 30 years ago, when Ebeling didn't want his name used or his voice recorded. He was afraid he would lose his job. "I think the truth has to come out," he says about the decision to speak privately then.

Ebeling retired soon after Challenger. He suffered deep depression and has never been able to lift the burden of guilt. In 1986, as he watched that haunting image again on a television screen, he said, "I could have done more. I should have done more."

The data he and his fellow engineers presented, and their persistent and sometimes angry arguments, weren't enough to sway Thiokol managers and NASA officials. Ebeling concludes he was inadequate. He didn't argue the data well enough. A religious man, this is something he has prayed about for the past 30 years.

"I think that was one of the mistakes that God made," Ebeling says softly. "God shouldn't have picked me for the job. But next time I talk to him, I'm gonna ask him, 'Why me. You picked a loser.' "

Following the airing of this 30th anniversary interview with Ebeling on NPR in 2016, The story elicited hundreds of supportive letters and emails. But these words of forgiveness were not enough to lift his depression or guilt, until letters from the former Thiokol executive Robert Lund and former NASA official George Hardy, who both told Ebeling the responsibility was theirs, not his. In their letters to him they assured him that he had done the right thing and that he was not to blame for the disaster.

Ebeling's daughter later shared with the reporter from NPR that it was only after those two letters from the company leaders themselves could he let go of his guilt and shame and the thirty years of regret lifted from him. Bob Ebeling died a few weeks later at age 89 in peace.

Guilt and shame are powerful emotions that can haunt us with our past mistakes. Just as it haunted Bob Ebeling for thirty years. I would imagine that the events of the final days of Jesus life haunted Peter and the other disciples, but I think it would have haunted Peter the worst. Just as Ebeling quit working and sunk into a deep depression from the guilt of not doing enough to stop the tragic flight, so Peter also quit and went fishing perhaps believing he was no longer competent to be the leader of the movement that Jesus called him to lead.

We can relate to Peter right? We have all been there with people we love and care in our lives right? We all live with regrets that haunt us for years and years later. We may

even know the weight of regret that Bob Ebeling felt after the Challenger exploded and the death of those astronauts weighed heavy on his conscious.

So we have this story of forgiveness that is so powerful for us even today. The story of Peter fishing and Jesus on the shore is very reminiscent of the first encounter story that Luke shares when Jesus first calls Peter to follow him. In Luke's story Jesus uses Peter's boat to preach to the people and after the sermon he tells Peter he should cast off and go into the deep waters and lower the nets. Peter at first complains that they had fished all night but caught nothing. Sound familiar? But Peter says,

“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

What I love about this second story, is that Peter is not saying, “Get away Jesus I have sinned” like he did the first time. He instead rushes to Jesus. He jumps in the water, not even waiting to help get the boat back to shore. Peter is not afraid but eager to go to Jesus.

They get back to the shore and see the fire and food. Food is representative of relationship. This is an intimate scene. This scene again reminiscent of the last supper with Jesus. These two friends, still showing their brokenness, Peter soaked with water and maybe guilt of his failings and Jesus still bearing the wounds of his death and yet Jesus is there prepared to feed Peter and the others once again.

But as Peter warms himself at the fire, it brings up another memory. The memory of him in the courtyard of the High Priest as he is asked three times “are you not one of his disciples?” And three times he says he is not, even going so far as to swearing that he is not.

This time it is Jesus who asks, “Peter do you love me more than these?” It is interesting that Peter doesn’t start it, Jesus does, and that they never say, “I am sorry, and I forgive you.” Jesus only question is “Do you love me?”

Three times he asks him, giving Peter an opportunity to correct the wrong from before. Covering over the pain and regret, with a deeper conviction of yes I do truly love you, more than anything.

Jesus calls Peter, in response to loving him, “feed my lambs, tend to my Sheep and Nurture my sheep”. Each time Jesus reminds Peter that the best way to show that he truly loves Jesus is to care for others. Feeding the lambs – care for the new, weak and tender followers of Christ, tend to my sheep – in the Greek it would say keep shepherding my sheep meaning be a leader bring them where they need to go. And finally feed my sheep – feed and nurture the growth of all, not just the young lambs in Christ, but all of God’s people.

Jesus ends this moment with these simple words to Peter. Follow me.

God does not call us to be perfect, but to know that even in our imperfect, and wounded selves, God calls to us, inviting us to relationships of love and vulnerability with Christ. The only question Jesus asks is, “Do you love me?”

If in our deepest hearts we say “Yes I love you”, Jesus command to us is to feed the lambs – care for one another when we are weak and vulnerable. If we Love Jesus then - Shepherd the sheep – Guide others in the ways of Faith. If we love Jesus then – Feed my sheep – raise up the community of faith. These are ways that we as followers of Christ show that we love God.