

I couldn't help myself. I clapped as if to say "Hallelujah" when Jelly Roll, the rapper turned country music star, the convict turned mentor for those looking for second chances who said, "that you don't change until the pain to remain the same is greater than the pain it takes to change." He said, "It's amazing what God can do in a year!" This drug dealer turned drug testifier in front of congress to raise awareness of the fentanyl epidemic, this tattoo covered, big 'ole dude who defies so many stereotypes, including being very articulate and intelligent,- he won not one but three country music awards last Sunday night. He is a reminder that you can't judge a book by its cover. His lyrics invite you not only into his soul and story but also into your own: stories filled with shadowed, heavy, and shame-filled pasts- some more damaging than others. In an interview on CBS Sunday morning that aired a few months ago, when asked about his past, Jelly Roll became quiet. Jelly Roll puts it this way to some prisoners he's visiting: "This is just a moment of your life. Who you were, isn't who you are. Change is around the corner for all of us! There's a reason the rearview mirror is smaller than the windshield: you need to keep looking forward and not let the past define you!" As I watched Jason DeFord's, aka Jelly Roll's, returning to the very prison where he had done time, I was caught off guard as was he when his filled with tears as he entered his old prison cell in Nashville, TN. The small cell, with a broken bed, metal toilet, tiny sink and a makeshift, bent, metal table that pulled down from the wall, was a place where as Jelly Roll described it, he had had a Damascus Road experience and came to know God. It was there in that prison cell that he wrote prolific lyrics spilling out his heart. This time though he was there not as an inmate but as an invited guest and motivational speaker. I would even venture to say, an evangelist or preacher (though Jelly Roll, when asked about it, laughs and says,

“No way!”). He says he’s spiritual but not religious, yet he mentioned God more times in an interview than church folks might. Since I first heard of him, I’ve been intrigued by the details in his story, and his vulnerability to share his shame and now redemption and grace with the world through his songs, and speaking engagements. In one of his songs he describes himself as “a country jail revival, a bottle and a Bible, a rolling stone disciple with a cross across his face, a trailer park tornado, jagged edges on his halo, hope the chariot gon’ swing low and carry me away. This little light of mine damn near burned me alive. Lord knows that mama tried and I don’t know if I’m halfway to heaven or halfway to hell. My angels and demons at war with myself.” He credits God using his wife to help him believe in himself. That’s what I really like about him. He doesn’t mince words. He’s real. We just heard another of Jellyroll’s song here in worship and in it, one can sense his desperation and confusion to be in relationship with God. He sings, “I know Amazing Grace, but I ain’t been livin’ them words. Swear I spend Sundays, drunk off my rear, than I have in church. Hard cover King James only been savin’ dust on the nightstand, and I don’t know what to say by the time I fold my hands. I only talk to God when I need a favor. And I only pray when I ain’t got a prayer...” After hearing these lyrics and spending time studying today’s text, I can’t help but to think of the disciple, Simon Peter. There’s a lot we don’t know about Peter, including everything that happens in today’s story. Yet, much like Thomas, who becomes unfairly known throughout the years as “the doubter,” Peter is known as “the denier.” Some things, like Jelly Roll’s nickname from an early age given to him by his mom, stick and never seem to go away. I wonder if Peter wrote songs, what lyrics would fill the page? Details are of uttermost importance in John’s Gospel, yet we are only given specific details about certain things. It’s interesting

to note that “the Jesus in Matthew seeks **pupils**. In Mark, Jesus summons **followers**. In Luke, it’s **partners**. In John it is either **believers or lovers**. In any case, believing and loving are nearly indistinguishable things in John’s theological imagination” (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org). Today’s resurrection appearance is the fourth one in John’s Gospel. It’s one of my favorites: breakfast on the beach with the Risen Lord after the disciples returned to their old life of fishing. Before we read today’s gospel lesson, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Anyone else catch that? “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake” (v. 7b). Do what? That doesn’t make any sense. So why was Peter naked on the boat? Do fishermen fish naked and if so were the others unclothed as well? And why when Simon Peter heard that Jesus was there did he immediately put on some clothes? As a former swimmer, I do know that wearing clothes in the water weighs you down/tires you out. Where have we heard about folks being naked and then clothing themselves when they hear God? That’s right. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (after they had taken a bite of the apple from the forbidden tree). After they knew that they had done wrong, they wanted to hide themselves from God. Peter is the naked one in today’s story. From scripture we know that Peter was also known as the Rock. He was “a fisher of men.” He proclaimed Jesus the Son of God before any other disciple dared to. His mother-in-law was healed by Jesus. He walked on water- well, not for long. He saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop. He promised to stay by Jesus’s side even unto death. His “courage failed so catastrophically around another charcoal fire on the night of Jesus’ arrest” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net) when he denied his discipleship with Jesus not

once but three times, as Jesus had predicted along with a rooster's crows. "One has to wonder how many times after Jesus died did Peter replay what he had done in his head, wishing beyond hope that he could just go back and erase it? Rewrite his own past? Be the person he wished he had been? Who among us can't relate to that feeling" (Nadia Bolz Weber, *Accidental Saints*)? Yet, even if Peter wished he had done things differently, he didn't avoid Jesus, as you might think he would. No, Peter swam toward Jesus. As a matter of fact, he was in such a hurry to swim toward Jesus that he left the other disciples to do the heavy lifting of their miraculous catch. Peter moves toward the voice- moving from the weighed down margins of his own self disappointment towards the life-giving, redeeming voice of a loving, saving Lord.

Right before today's scripture reading Peter says to the other disciples, "I am going fishing." There wasn't a "let's" but an "I." "I am going fishing" isn't necessarily an invitation for the others to tag along. Maybe Peter needed some time alone? Maybe Peter wanted to go back to his familiar roots of fishing- at least there he knew what he was doing? Maybe he just wanted to escape from the shame and humiliation of seeing Jesus again? Forget about any alone time, if that's what Peter was after because the others quickly invited themselves along for the trip. "We'll go with you." For whatever reason, they wouldn't let Peter go by himself. So all seven disciples went on an unsuccessful night fishing expedition together. "Time after time their nets come up empty, a perfect match for their hearts (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*). They can't go forward and they can't go back. This is their new reality. All they can do is sit together in the dark and wait for daybreak. As the morning light arrives, a voice comes from the shore,

“Children, you have no fish, have you?” What? How did this person know that they didn’t have any fish in their net? Not to mention that they don’t seem to pick up on the “children” part. Yet, they answered the voice. Then came a pro tip from the voice about where to place the net. They could’ve yelled “Mind your own business,” but they didn’t. They listened and obeyed, and we’re told that they caught so many fish that they couldn’t haul it in! That’s how the disciple whom Jesus loved knew it was the Lord because there was an abundance. And this is where Peter jumped in after putting on some clothes. After all of them reached shore, Jesus, the welcoming host, asked them to bring some of the fish they had caught, and Peter- all by himself- ran back to the boat and hauled the net ashore, filled to the brim with 153 large fish- the net not even torn by the incredible bounty. Who was in charge of THAT head count? Jesus then invited them all to “come and have breakfast,” and none of them dared to ask who Jesus was because they knew it was the Lord. Isn’t that interesting?! Did no one speak or reminisce about the good ole days or even the hard recent days with Jesus during breakfast? It’s not just Peter. No, these disciples, much like us, are total shipwrecks. Yes, the Risen Lord has risen from the dead to redeem, restore, and reconcile these broken disciples, and he starts with Peter.

“Around the fire Jesus builds, Peter’s fear and denial evolves into trust and worship” (Thomas). And after they ate, Jesus, perhaps breaking the ice and definitely not avoiding hard conversations, asks Peter three questions. While Peter doesn’t recognize it at first, Jesus feeds Peter’s body and then he feeds Peter’s soul. Let me be clear. Jesus does not blame or shame Peter. He does not ask for Peter’s repentance. Jesus does not ask three times to remind Peter of his

three-fold denial nor to test him or trap him, as some scholars claim. I don't know about you but that is not the Jesus I know and love or in whom I believe and follow. Instead, "Jesus reaffirms who Peter needs to be: a shepherd" (Lewis). Yes, Jesus asks a fisherman to act like a shepherd. That's a bit odd, but it's John. You can see where the denial could sneak in. "Denying our identity is an all too often reality. We deny who we are because we worry that we don't meet expectations. We deny who we are because we are afraid to disappoint. We deny who we are because we could be judged, even rejected, for that truth. We deny who we are because we do not believe that we will be liked for who we truly are, or that we will be loved for who we truly are" (Lewis). Maybe Peter cannot believe that Jesus could believe in him because he cannot believe in himself?! Jesus sees something in Peter he cannot see himself. Notice what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say "remember what a jerk you were"- the familiar smell of smoke from the charcoal fire probably did that. Nor did he ask, "Who is going to take you seriously?" "When will you deliver some results?" I do wonder what's going on in Peter's mind though. Like Jelly Roll's lyrics: are his angels and demons at war with himself? The text tells us that Peter is hurt that Jesus asks him "Do you love me?" three times. "Why is Jesus asking this of me?," Peter may have wondered. One night as the on-call chaplain, I was paged to a man's room in the hospital. He was dying and alert. He grabbed my hand and pulled me close to his face so that I could hear him. He asked, "Has God forgiven me?" I said, "I don't think that's the question for God has already forgiven you." "Then what's the question?," he asked. I said, "The question is 'Have you forgiven yourself?'" Tears rolled down his cheeks as he shook his head no. We prayed together that he would receive God's love and grace, as he was stuck in his shame and guilt. Jesus says nothing about

forgiveness here. No. The person needing to forgive Peter was Peter himself. Jesus simply wanted Peter's love no matter how feeble or inconsistent, and he wanted Peter to love and forgive himself so that he could love, forgive, and feed others. Jesus comes to the beach "not to call back a straying disciple or to twist the knife about the threefold denial. He's there to remind Peter of his calling because new challenges lie ahead and vulnerable sheep cannot be helped by someone incapable of love" (Skinner). Maybe what Peter needs is to accept who Jesus needs him to be?!

What would our witness look like if the Church epitomized Jesus' version of reconciliation? What would the world be like if Christians were known as the people to run to in times of humiliation? (Thomas). *Amazing grace...how sweet the sound...that saved a wretch like me.* The love of the resurrected Lord, especially in and among the least likely people and places, is the way that God redeems even the biggest shipwrecks or messes we make. In God's mercy, all can be redeemed (Nadia Bolz Weber). "Peter's shame meets Jesus' grace, and Jesus' grace wins. That's the Gospel story in a nutshell. As research professor Brené Brown puts it, 'Shame cannot survive being spoken.' Meaning, shame cannot survive the living Word. Shame cannot tolerate the resurrection. When shame encounters the God who is Love, it burns to ash and scatters" (Thomas). Will you pray for God to release whatever shame is keeping you from tending his sheep and receiving Christ's love and following him? Amen.