**Set Free** May 4, 2025 Jn 21:1-19

* “***phantom limb pain”-*** A condition when someone has a limb amputated and still feels the pain that was present before the limb was amputated.
* Somewhere, locked in their brains, a memory lingers of the now nonexistent limb. (Brother-in-law)
* Although rare, sometimes the pain can be very severe, and doctors watch helplessly as a part of the body that doesn’t exist anymore is screaming for attention.
* Story about an individual who had a serious & painful circulation problem in his leg but refused to allow the recommended amputation.
* As the pain grew worse, the patient grew very bitter.
* “***I hate it! I hate it!***” he would mutter about the leg. At last he relented and told the doctor, “***I can’t stand it anymore. I’m through with that leg. Take it off.***” Surgery was scheduled immediately.
* Before the operation, however, the patient asked the doctor, “***What do you do with legs after they’re removed***?”
* “***We may take a biopsy or explore them a bit, but afterwards we incinerate them***,” the doctor replied.
* The patient then made a bizarre request: “I would like you to preserve my leg in a large pickling jar. I will install it on my mantle shelf. Then, as I sit in my armchair, I will taunt that leg, ‘***Hah! You can’t hurt me anymore!***’”
* Ultimately, he got his wish. But the despised leg had the last say.
* The patient suffered *phantom limb pain* of the worst degree. The wound healed, but he could feel the torturous pressure of the swelling as the muscles cramped, and he had no prospect of relief. He had hated the leg with such intensity that the pain had lodged permanently in his brain.
* Such phantom limb pain provides great insight into the whole phenomenon of guilt, & how people sometimes hold on to things that can imprison them.
* The whole concept of guilt and shame is something that can affect every one of us.
* I believe it is also what Jesus is talking about in today’s gospel reading.
* There is a common saying: “***Time heals all wounds***.”
* “***It’s not true - it’s a lie.***”
* Unless a person is able to name the sin, either that they committed that was committed against them, and deal with it, they can become as pitiful as the poor patient I just described, shaking a fist at the pickled leg on the mantle.
* When something is wrong within us – when our consciences are screaming out because of something we have done in the past . . . . Or, when the hidden anger, or depression, or feelings of worthlessness, or whatever it is within us is so great because of something that was done to us in the past.
* We can never be whole or reach the potential in our lives that God has planned for us.
* Guilt, especially, can be a horrible thing, and can literally cripple us.
* We can shove it down & pretend it isn’t there – but it always is.
* In gospel reading we read where Jesus reinstates Peter.
* We remember all too well how Peter, out of fear, denied Jesus three times when Jesus was brought before the high priests.
* And, of course here we read where Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loved Him.
* It is understood as sort of a balancing – Peter denies Jesus three times & then Jesus asks him three times to acknowledge his love for Him.
* And after each time, Jesus affirms Peter with His trust for ministering to & caring for His e/e.
* 1st of all if we were to look at Peter’s denials, we could say that we shouldn’t be surprised considering the mob mentality that existed & the obvious threat to Peter’s own life had he not denied Jesus.
* It was earlier that very same evening, while they were eating the Last Supper together, that Peter proclaimed to Jesus: “***Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.***”
* So, here’s the order of things. Peter denies Jesus. Jesus is tortured & crucified. Peter, as well as the other disciples, are discouraged, scared & in hiding.
* But then everything changes – there is Easter morning.
* 1st, the empty tomb is discovered, and then the disciples actually see Jesus & spend time with Him.
* As we read in last week’s gospel reading, the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.
* We also read last week where Jesus affirmed their ministry when He said: “***As the father has sent me, I am sending you***.”
* Everything should now be ok, you would think.
* But everything is ***not*** ok.
* These disciples walked with Jesus for three years, where Jesus taught them.
* They had witnessed first hand the resurrected Jesus, and at that time, Jesus affirmed them to go out with the same authority that the Father gave Him.
* But that doesn’t appear to be the direction they are taking.
* Our reading began today with Peter saying: “***I’m going out to fish***.”
* After all that had happened, why would Peter choose to return to his fishing nets & his occupation as a fisherman?
* I think there can only be one answer – Peter could not accept himself as being worthy to serve Jesus because of the incredible guilt that he was holding within himself for the way he denied Jesus.
* I would suggest that Peter could not forgive himself.
* We have all experienced guilt & shame before, so I think we can just imagine Peter replaying over & over, like a tape, how he denied Jesus.
* Going back fishing was his way to busy himself, & maybe after some time, the pain would go away.
* Jesus knew however that if Peter was to be effective in the ministry He was calling him into, he would have to start with a clean slate.
* He would have to forgive himself – he would have to let go of the past, & stop beating himself up over it.
* And the only way that could possibly happen would be for Peter to be confronted with this painful memory.
* And that is what Jesus does.
* It was very painful to Peter when Jesus kept asking him if he loved Him.
* There was no question in Peter’s mind concerning his love for Jesus.
* It was precisely because he loved Jesus so much that he now feels so badly he denied Him & did not stand for Him in His time of such great need.
* This exercise was for Peter – not Jesus.
* Jesus knew Peter’s love for Him, but now Peter had to choose whether he loved Jesus more than fishing
* And even more importantly, he had to choose whether he loved Jesus more than hanging on to his guilt & shame.
* His life & ministry had to be shaped by his love for Jesus and not this ugly guilt & shame that was on his soul – he would have to let go of that.
* What Jesus was really saying is: “***Peter, you have to let go of the past & stop feeling sorry for yourself***.”
* I don’t want to over-simplify it, but when we live in shame & guilt, we are actually, in one sense, feeling sorry for ourselves.
* How we let go of our ugly pasts that may be hindering the person God created us to be will differ for each one of us, but two things are certain:

1. We cannot grow fully in Christ until we do.
2. Letting go of our pasts means confronting our pasts.

* Each one of us is created as a precious child of God.
* Jesus wants us to let go of any hurtful pasts that may be preventing us from becoming the person God intended.
* “***I have come so that you can have life & have it to the full***.” (Jn 10:10)
* For us to know life in its fullest sense means giving up our painful pasts – giving them to Jesus & leaving them at the foot of His cross.
* There are some wonderful examples in Scripture of how people were confronted with their pasts and how God was able to use them in such wonderful & powerful ways once they were set free.
* There is the story of King David who was described as a man after God’s own heart.
* But 1st David had to deal with his past. He was confronted by the prophet Nathan about his adultery & murder.
* It was only after he confessed these sins and was freed from them that he could do the wonderful things for the Lord that he did.
* Probably the best example of all is found in this morning’s first reading.
* Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus where Saul, who became the apostle Paul was confronted by Jesus.
* “***Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me***?”
* I don’t believe there was anyone who persecuted the church & followers of Jesus more than Paul.
* Yet Paul became the greatest evangelist and apostle - ever.
* It was Paul, who said in Philippians 3:7-8: “***Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”***
* Can you imagine how ineffective Paul *would have been* in his ministry if all he could say was, “***O, what an awful person I am! What horrible things I have done! I can never forgive myself for what I have done***.”
* Paul was freed from his past but that didn’t mean that he denied his past.
* He spoke often about his past, but it was always in a sense that clearly showed that it no longer had any control over him.
* He actually used his past to his advantage to help others know Christ & to let go of their pasts.
* Jesus confronted Peter about his past denials so that he could be freed from any shame & guilt, & be the person he was called to be.
* Jesus confronts each one of us to let go of our hurtful pasts, so that we can be the person we were called to be.
* He doesn’t want us to be like the patient I described at the beginning, responding to most of life’s challenges with anger & frustration.
* Jesus wants us to let go of our past hurts, but He doesn’t expect us to do it on our own.
* He is there to take it from us.
* He wants us to give it to Him – to lay it all at the foot of His cross.
* When he died on the cross it was for our sins, our pains, & our sorrows.
* He wants to be fully a part of our lives – not just the nice, smiley parts, but all of it, esp. the painful parts.
* Just as Jesus did not remain on the cross, we are not to remain in our painful pasts.
* We are to live with the new life & the freedom of His resurrection, like Peter