

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
May 4, 2025**

**“The Language of Reconciliation”
Texts: John 21:1-19 and Acts 9:1-6**

This spring I was invited to attend an online study sponsored by Garrett Seminary, my alma mater. The report we were looking at was a well-researched study about indigenous people. I knew going into the study that the land for the seminary was donated in the 1800's by Eliza Garrett. Her generous donation made the seminary possible. But that donation was not without its challenges.

For one, Eliza Garrett's husband, Augustus, acquired the land and much of his wealth through buying the land after the native people were removed. He bought the land at much less than it was valued and then sold it to the newcomers moving into the Chicago area. I didn't know that he promised Eliza that he would one day do something good with this acquired wealth. He kept putting her off, saying he would do it some day. Some day never came. When he passed away, he had done nothing philanthropic with his wealth.

To make matters worse, at the time of his death, Eliza was not able to inherit the wealth. This was the status of women in the early 1800's. She had to file a lawsuit and was eventually able to inherit a portion of his wealth and land holdings. She would make good on the desire to use the land for positive purposes, donating the lakefront property for the establishment of a seminary.

This was one small part of the findings in the study. Having completed this study, I find myself seeing things with new eyes. Now when I hear of the donation, I am aware of how difficult it was for Eliza to carry out this kind and generous act. I am also aware of the background that led to this wealth. And the information about the native people has made me more aware of the people who lived here in Indiana before the European settlers arrived. The Miami, Delaware, Potawatomi and others. The result of this study is that I see things that were always there, but now become more apparent. I see things that I didn't notice before. When I hear about the first settlers to come to Indiana, I am aware that there were already settlers here.

There are moments when we have our eyes opened to things that have always been there, but were not noticed before.

That seems like an appropriate transition into the scriptures for this morning. They are about having our eyes opened, seeing the things that have always been there but were easily overlooked. But even when our eyes are opened, there are new insights waiting.

Let's begin with the gospel reading from John. Jesus has already appeared to the disciples in a room where the door was locked. They were shocked and astonished to see him. But he isn't done yet.

In today's reading, several of the disciples have gone to the Sea of Tiberius to fish. Maybe it was a time to relax and reflect. Maybe it was a chance to do something they hadn't done in a long time. They have gone back to the starting point, back to the vocation they knew and perhaps figured they would do for the rest of their lives.

But it seems that they have lost their touch. They have caught no fish. A stranger sees them and says, "Have you caught nothing?" It might be a bit of teasing on the part of this stranger. He knows them. And even though they don't recognize him yet, they know him. All that time on the water and they have caught nothing. So the stranger makes a suggestion. "Throw your net on the other side of the boat." This sounds like taunting. If there were no fish on the left side of the boat, there won't be anything on the right side. There isn't that much difference from one side to the next. But just for the sake of showing this amateur, Peter puts his net down on the right side. And the result is an abundance of fish. How did this happen?

It is in that moment that Peter's eyes are opened. He realizes who this stranger is. It is Jesus. The playful, teasing Jesus. He races out of the boat to greet him.

That is a shocking detail of this story, but it is not the point I want to make. There is another insight that impacts us today.

The disciples and Jesus gather on the shore to enjoy this fish. Once again, Jesus has gathered with friends for a special meal. And during the meal, Jesus begins to ask Peter questions. He begins by asking Peter, "do you love me more than these?" Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." So he tells him to feed my lambs.

A second time Jesus asks, "Peter, do you love me more than these?" Peter responds, "You know that I do." So Jesus tells him, "Tend my sheep."

But he isn't through. A third time he asks, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter is hurt by this question. He says, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus replies, "Feed my sheep."

Biblical scholars have made much of this exchange. The presumption is that Jesus asks this question, in different forms, three times as a way of responding to the fact that Peter denied Jesus three times.

One can imagine that Peter is hoping that Jesus didn't know this about him. Looking back, he is disappointed in his actions. He wished he hadn't denied Jesus. He regrets his actions and he is hoping that Jesus doesn't know what he did. Whether Jesus knew it or not, he was keenly aware that something was amiss in their relationship. It is like any good friendship that you can tell when something isn't right.

Without any words being exchanged, Jesus can sense the shame and guilt. Even if he doesn't know the details of what Peter has done, he knows that something is off. He doesn't ask Peter to go into details. He just offers him grace. He heals the relationship.

That is a remarkable thing about grace. Not only is it free, but sometimes it is the kind of gift that we know we need and didn't even have to ask for. It was just given. And I can't explain that. It doesn't have to make sense. It just is. Although theologians have spoken about the threefold question as a parallel to the three denials, I don't recall ever seeing any mention of the fact that Peter didn't ask for that forgiveness. Jesus just gave it.

That is the power of shame in our lives. We live with the memories of those moments when we failed to be the person we wanted to be. And God steps in to offer forgiveness. God restores our relationship. We are made whole once again. Not because we deserved it. And not even because we asked for it. Grace is a gift given because God desires that healing and wholeness for our lives.

That makes the second story equally intriguing. Saul is on a journey to the city of Damascus. Along the way he experienced a blinding flash of light. He fell to the ground frightened. And he heard a voice asking why he was persecuting God's people. Why are you so unkind to my people? In the way that we treat one another today, this question could be asked repeatedly. Why are we so unkind to one another?

Saul asks who is speaking and discovers that it is Jesus. One might assume that this revelation would be met with great fear. What he has been doing has come to light. Saul may be there awaiting his punishment. But that is not the way of Jesus. Jesus has something better in mind and instructs Saul to continue his journey to Damascus and to wait there for further instructions.

What follows after this encounter is that God sends a man named Ananias to come pray with Saul. Understandably, Ananias is reluctant. He knows Saul's reputation. But he does as God has asked and prays with Saul. And when he does, scales fall from his eyes and his sight is restored.

This is the familiar story of the conversion of Saul. He would later change his name, as an indication of the change that has come to his life. From this point forward he will be known as Paul. His former self is no more.

But perhaps the scales have fallen from my eyes as well with these stories. I see the parallels in that Jesus forgives Peter without Peter ever asking. And he forgives Saul without Saul ever asking. That is the nature of God's grace. It comes to us sometimes without even having to ask for it.

While traveling on the Natchez Trace Parkway last week, I stopped one morning for breakfast. The waitress set the items before me and I was ready to dig in. But among the items was a bowl of grits. I said it all looked good, but I hadn't ordered grits. The waitress smiled and with a southern drawl said, "You don't order grits. They just come."

Suddenly grits tasted like grace. You don't order grace. It just comes. It is a gift. The Chef of the Universe delights in sharing that gift with us all.

But I want to push this realization just a bit. While I truly believe that neither Peter nor Saul asked for grace, but received it in abundance, I worry that we are not quite so generous.

We are not generous with ourselves, believing that we don't deserve such forgiveness. We feel like we have to do some grand gesture to merit this grace. I have to earn it. As much as I am grateful for God's forgiveness, I feel unworthy. That is what makes this gift so profound. It is what truly makes it a gift.

And sometimes, we want to be more judicious with God's grace. We want to dole it out much more carefully. God is a bit too generous and we want to be more cautious about who gets grace. We refuse to let go of the past and allow people to be something new.

In the movie, "The Spitfire Grill," the lead character is Percy Talbot. She has been released from a prison in Maine. With no family, nowhere to go, she chooses to relocate to a small town named Gilead. Along with a great storyline, the movie has incredible cinematography. As Percy arrives in Gilead, it is dark and cold and dreary. No one is paying attention to her arrival. Nor are they paying attention to one another. The opening scene is a great image of the community and people's indifference to one another.

Percy works as a waitress in the Spitfire Grill. She brings warmth and kindness to her work and that begins to rub off on the people. But there are some who are skeptical about Percy and her intentions. Knowing that she has been released from jail, there are some who question her motives. One of the characters will say, "People can't change. Once a criminal, always a criminal."

Without giving away too much of the plot, the movie asks the questions of forgiveness, healing, reconciliation. Is it possible for people to be changed? To become something new? And the movie will answer the question in the affirmative. For Percy, but also for the town itself.

The movie ends with another visitor arriving in town. But this time the cinematography is quite different. It is bright and sunny, people are conversing with one another. They are eagerly awaiting this new arrival and they welcome her with warmth and hospitality. Not only has Percy changed, but she has helped the community to change as well.

Peter didn't ask for forgiveness. Maybe because he was ashamed. Maybe because he didn't feel he was worthy. Maybe because he was hoping Jesus would never find out. But Jesus blessed him with forgiveness. Saul didn't ask for forgiveness. Maybe because he didn't want to change. Maybe it was all he had ever known. But Jesus offered him forgiveness.

That is what God offers to us today. Healing. Wholeness. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Not because we deserve it and not even because we asked for it. Just because God loves sharing that forgiveness and knows that it is exactly what we need. Grace, like grits, just comes. And for that we can be grateful.