

“Act Two”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Frank Sinatra is remembered as one of the greatest vocalists in the history of popular music, a multitalented performer who “changed the style and popular culture of the American Century.” What has been largely forgotten about Sinatra’s career is that at one time he was considered all but washed-up, having lost his 1940s audience of big-band aficionados and “bobby-soxers” due to shifting musical tastes and a loss of his voice that would never recover its consistently-accurate intonation and precise pitch. In the early 1950s, Sinatra lost his movie contract with MGM, his recording contract with Columbia, and his marriage to Ava Gardner. It seemed that Sinatra was proving F. Scott Fitzgerald’s adage true, that “*there are no second acts in American lives.*”

But Sinatra’s fortunes began to change in 1953, when he played the role of Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* and won an Academy Award. He then signed with Capitol Records and recorded 16 albums that are considered “*his most remarkable achievement and among America’s enduring cultural treasures.*” Sinatra continued to record albums, act in movies, and appear in concerts for many years, and years after his death his legacy continues. Frank Sinatra’s career is remembered today as “*the most spectacular second act in American cultural history.*”

While Sinatra is one of many historical figures who did enjoy a second act, not everyone is so fortunate. For many people, the stigma of failure defines the rest of their lives, and any attempted comebacks only compound their failures. At the beginning of today’s Gospel, Peter is such a figure; it is doubtful that there will be a second act for the disciple who failed Jesus so spectacularly when he denied his Lord three times in the hour of Jesus’ greatest need. “*Three times Peter had not loved Jesus more than all else. The potential leader became a figure of shame as the cock crowed.*” (William Loader). We have no reason to expect any second act for the prideful disciple who had boasted that “*I will lay down my life for you*” (John 13:37) but publicly denied being one of Jesus’ disciples.

At the beginning of the final chapter in John’s Gospel, the scene has shifted from Jerusalem to Galilee by the Sea of Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), where the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples for the third time: “*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.*” (21:1). The phrase “showed himself” is associated with the revelatory dimension of Jesus’ miracles in the Fourth Gospel:

- “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” – 2:11.
- “Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’” – 9:3.

The miracle story that follows in this last chapter is an epiphany, interpreted in the light of the revelatory acts of Jesus’ ministry.

John reports that Simon Peter is among the disciples who had gathered on the shores of the sea, but it soon becomes clear that he no longer considers himself worthy of being a disciple of Jesus. Instead, he is determined to go back to his former career, announcing to the others that “*I am going fishing.*” (21:3). Along with his brother Andrew, Simon Peter had been a fisherman on the same waters when Jesus invited them to become his followers:

- “As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” – Mark 1:16-18.

Having failed as a disciple of Jesus, Peter might have resigned himself to returning to the profession at which he had once been proficient; but the stigma of failure seems to have attached itself to him permanently, because when Peter and his fellow disciples “*went out and got into the boat ... that night they caught nothing.*” Peter has failed as a disciple and as a fisherman; will he ever know anything but failure again?

When Peter and his companions return to shore after their unsuccessful night on the waters of the Sea of Tiberias, they encounter a man on the beach who the readers of John’s Gospel know is Jesus, “*but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.*” (21:4), a situation that is similar to the two travelers to Emmaus who encounter Jesus “*while they were talking and discussing ... but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*” (Luke 24:15-16). After observing that “*you have no fish, have you,*” Jesus instructs the disciples to “*cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.*” (21:6). Even though they do not realize this is Jesus who is issuing this command, the disciples cast their nets into the same waters that had previously yielded no fish; but this time, “*they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.*” This miraculous catch of fish is the catalyst for the Beloved Disciple’s recognition of Jesus: “*That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’*” The Beloved Disciple (the title that the Fourth Gospel assigns to John, the brother of James and the son of Zebedee) recognizes the abundance of fish as deriving from the fullness of Jesus’ gifts described at the beginning of the Gospel:

- “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” – 1:14-16.

Peter’s initial reaction to hearing that the man on the shore is Jesus is curious: “*When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.*” (21:7). Why would someone put on clothes before jumping into the water, we may ask? It may be a sign of his impetuosity: Peter is caught between his desire to greet Jesus with proper respect (which would mean being fully clothed) and his eagerness to greet him immediately. The other disciples are not quite as impetuous; they “*came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from land, only about a hundred yards off.*” (21:8).

When they arrive on the shore – Peter soaking wet, the other disciples nicely dry – they discover that Jesus has prepared a charcoal fire with bread and fish on it – the same food that Jesus serves at the feeding of the Five Thousand (6:1-14). When he invites them to “*bring some of the fish that you have just caught,*” Peter goes aboard the boat and “*hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.*” (21:10-11). The word “haul” (*helko*) is the same verb used elsewhere in John to describe both those who come to Jesus from God and the salvific effect of his death:

- “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.” – 6:44.
- “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” – 12:32.

The use of this verb with reference to the disciples and the catch of fish suggests that they now that they will now join God and Jesus in drawing people to Jesus, fulfilling Jesus’ promise that they will share in his works: “*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*” (14:12).

When the meal is ready and Jesus invites them to “*come and have breakfast,*” the disciples recognize that this is the Lord and therefore do not question Jesus about his identity. As they shared a meal at the Last Supper, the fellowship of this meal on the seashore confirms the intimacy of the relationship between the risen Lord and the disciples; he shares the bread and fish with them as he shared the bread and cup that is the “*new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.*” John’s conclusion reminds the readers that “*this was not the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead*” (21:14), affirming that the fishing miracle is an epiphany.

When Jesus and the disciples have finished breakfast, he suddenly turns to Peter and asks him, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*” (21:15). This is the first time Jesus speaks directly to Peter after the disciple’s failure in his denial of Jesus before his crucifixion, and it must have taken Peter by surprise. He responds by affirming that “*yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*” This begins a threefold pattern that will be repeated with minimal variation:

1. Jesus questions Peter’s love of him.
2. Peter affirms his love of Jesus.
3. Jesus charges Peter to feed/care for his sheep.

What Peter may not realize is that Jesus is leading Peter through a process that will take him from denial into affirmation so that failure will not define the rest of his life:

- “The veil of death is parted; through it a hand reaches out to a Peter, shamed and probably resigned to former routines. Wherever and however it happened, Peter was turned from death to life. The God who had not abandoned Christ in death would not abandon Peter in his. Against all odds and against the prevailing values which would later ascend to rule in much theology, God proposed love to Peter again.” – William Loader.

Not only is Peter given an opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus and thereby leave behind the stigma of his three denials; he is entrusted with the care of those who Jesus loves and for whom he gave his life. Peter is positioned as a model of what it means to live out one’s love of Jesus and to serve as his witnesses “*in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8).

As Jesus rehabilitates Peter and restores him from failure back to discipleship, he reminds Peter and all who are called to serve our Lord that there is a cost to this discipleship. Jesus contrasts the freedom of Peter’s youth with the captivity that will mark his old age and death: “*Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you to where you do not wish to go.*” (21:18). The link between Jesus’ death and Peter’s eventual martyrdom (tradition teaches that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome) is made explicit by the phrase the author includes that “*he said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God,*” which Jesus also mentions in his High Priestly Prayer earlier in the Fourth Gospel:

- “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” – 17:1-5.

Jesus ends his rehabilitation of Peter by reissuing the invitation to discipleship: “*Follow me,*” a general invitation to discipleship that is here a more specific invitation to martyrdom and death (“*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.*” 12:26). Now Peter is able to do what he could not do before: lay down his life in love.

- “Peter is not disowned. Peter is legendary. His rehabilitation is a celebration of divine grace. He also symbolizes leadership, the shepherd appointed by the true shepherd, to do as he did, to care for the sheep. There could be no arrogance here, no lofty superiority, no graceless dogmatism. Instead, a frail human person brought again to his feet, enriched with stories of Jesus, and brought to life and leadership by Jesus’ generosity. Such is the image and the possibility.” – Loader.

The story of Peter's rehabilitation is good news for us in that it reminds us that there are second acts for all of us because of God's gracious love and willingness to forgive us and welcome us back into his loving arms. Even when we give up on ourselves, God does not give up on us; even when we see ourselves as failures, God refuses to allow our failures to define the rest of our lives. No matter how far we have strayed, God is also calling us to come home, to *"return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."* (Joel 2:13). We may not see any possible home in our future due to the failures of our past, but God invites us to look to the future with hope, because our future is God's future, and we believe that God will accomplish God's loving will *"on earth as it is in heaven,"* which will come about *"whenever God breaks and hinders every evil scheme and will ... and instead strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and faith until the end of our lives."* (*Small Catechism*). We cannot define ourselves as failures, because God does not see us as failures.

- "When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud." – Helmut Thielicke.

Frank Sinatra might be remembered as a failed singer whose once-brilliant promise quickly disappeared if someone hadn't seen the possibility that there was a second act for him; and because he was given the opportunity for a new beginning, he is remembered as one of the greatest singers in the history of popular music. Simon Peter might have been stigmatized as a failure in the same manner in which Judas Iscariot is renowned for his betrayal of Jesus if our Lord hadn't come to him on the seashore and led him through a threefold process of restoration; but because Jesus did not see Peter as a failure but as a beloved child in whom he would entrust his sheep, St. Peter became one of the great apostles of the earliest days of Christianity and the rock upon which the Church of Jesus Christ is built. We may have had defeats that have defined our lives as failures – in our own eyes as well as in the eyes of others – but no matter what has happened in our past, there is always a second act for those who are in Christ Jesus, who has *"reconciled us to himself ... and given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

- "We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need 'grace-healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. 'To love a person,' said Dostoevsky, 'means to see him as God intended him to be.' – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

No matter what has happened to us in Act One, there is always an Act Two for us as God's children. No matter how many times we may have failed, we must never let our failures stigmatize us or define us. We are God's children – and God's children are never failures, but persons chosen and beloved who walk into a future filled with new hope and fresh possibilities because *"we have God's own promise, and that cannot fail!"* Amen.