

Lifting Up Those Who Fall
Galatians 6:1-2, John 21:15-19

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April 25, 2010

I saved a clipping from the newspaper several years ago with the headline, "**Tourists shoot videotape as mom drowns.**" Here is the story from Mont Saint-Michel, France (AP): *Dozens of tourists at the medieval Mont Saint-Michel abbey impassively watched and even videotaped a woman drown as she tried to save her child. The incident...was reported...by merchants at the celebrated landmark who were outraged by the visitors' behavior. Residents reported hearing a tourist say, "I got the whole thing on tape."*

The abbey is on a tiny island just off the Norman coast. It is surrounded by water at high tide, but ringed by dry land when the tide goes out. Millions of people visit each year. 6-year-old Victorine Guillernee and her mother, 42-year-old Marie-Noelle, were walking along the base of the hill when the little girl fell into a deep water hole. As the frantic mother tried to save her, tourists higher up in the ramparts apparently watched without trying to intervene or call rescuers. Some videotaped the incident.

A cafe owner, his curiosity aroused by the tourists, realized what was happening and ran to find two firemen. They were able to save the girl but not the mother. [A fireman said] he was "revolted" by the onlookers' callousness. "Hundreds of people just watched a live drowning," he said. "Lots of people saw it and everyone thought rescuers had been alerted, when no one had been at all."

The story is deeply ironic because Mont Saint-Michel is a place for Christian community and even the tourists were there to visit the beautiful church on the island. Sometimes even at church when we see someone fall in a deep hole our first thought is to gather information, to get it on tape so to speak, so that we can tell others about it. Sometimes we all think someone else will help and no one does.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul tells us what to do when one of us falls down. "If anyone in the church falls into a trap of sin, you who have the Spirit of Christ in you should restore that person to the Christian life with great gentleness." We fall down. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. 1 John says, "If any of you says that you are without sin, you are deceiving yourself." Proverbs 24:16 says "Godly people fall down seven times [but] they always get up." We fall down and we get up, but we don't get up by ourselves. In a Christian community when we fall someone reaches down to us and picks us up.

Galatians 6:1 says if someone is caught in a sin, don't leave him to sink or swim because it's his own fault. Don't leave him to drown just outside the church. Instead, restore that person. That word "restore" is used of fishermen mending their nets. It was the word used by doctors to talk about setting a broken bone back in the right place. We are to restore a struggling brother or sister rather than condemning them.

We are to do it in a spirit of humility. We know that we ourselves have fallen, and we can fall again. In the movie *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, a young woman is talking to her father about all the failures of her mother. Her father says to her "They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions." The daughter asks, "And what is the road *back* from hell paved with?" He answers, "Humility." Not only for the one who has fallen under the burden of sin, but for the one who would come alongside to help.

Is there any sin that cannot be forgiven? Is there any failure that should keep a person out of leadership in the church? I think no story speaks to that more clearly than the story traditionally read during the Easter season because it is one of the appearances of the risen Christ—the story of how after Peter had been caught in a transgression and Jesus in a spirit of gentleness restored him not only as a friend but as a leader.

The last chapter of John, chapter 21, looks like an afterthought. You certainly get the impression at the end of chapter 20 that the book is over, and my bet is that at least one draft of the book ended there. But the disciple John's community thought this story of Jesus' breakfast with his disciples demanded to be told. As in some of the other stories of the risen Jesus, the disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first. They had gone back to fishing and weren't expecting to see Jesus again. They hadn't caught a single fish, and the unrecognized Jesus tells them to cast their nets over the other side of their boat—and they catch 153 fish in one net, which has to be some kind of parable of the success Jesus will give them as fishers of men. John recognizes Jesus, and Peter, who is working buck naked on the boat, grabs a swimsuit and swims to Jesus. After breakfast, Jesus sits down with Peter ("the Rock"), calling him by his given name: Shimon bar-Jona. The one who had denied Jesus three times is given three chances to affirm that he loves Jesus, undoing the denial, and Jesus tells Peter that the way to show that he loves Jesus is to take care of Jesus' followers and fulfill his calling as a leader in spite of his failure. There's a funny little footnote about a misunderstanding over whether John was going to live forever which needs to be cleared up, and then the book ends.

You can surmise from the ending that there was even some tension between the churches who saw John as their founder and those who felt closer to Peter (those who produced the Gospel of Mark). But even so, John's followers felt compelled to include this story in their gospel. Why? It may be because the issue of denial of Jesus in the face of danger had become an issue in their own community. Can we be restored when we fail to be loyal to Jesus? The answer this story gives—from Jesus' own example—is yes.

Can you imagine what Jesus must have thought standing on the edge of that great lake that morning? In the distance he sees a boat he recognizes as the one holding seven of his closest followers. They follow the practice of many sensible cultures regarding fishing: they don't wear clothes when they fish. I'm not advocating that on Block Island, but I remember seeing Japanese fishermen work naked when I was a little kid on the beach near a fishing village. I've seen such things in *National Geographic*. So here Jesus sees Peter naked, as Peter had seen Jesus naked on the cross. He sees Peter with all pretense stripped away, as he truly is. He sees the man who loved him and fully intended to go to the death with him but could not follow through, a man whose courage failed him. Yes, he sees a man who was full of hot air, full of b.s., who when the going got tough got going. He sees a man who denied that he ever knew Jesus. So Jesus could have acted hurt, the way we do. He could have rubbed it in. But instead he feeds Peter breakfast and then he pulls him aside and asks him tenderly, "Do you love me?" That's all I want to know. Not "Why did you do that to me" but do you love me now. I know you love me, but I want you to say it three times to purge your guilt. If you love me, I have work for you to do, and I want you to continue to follow me all your life, even, as you promised, to the death.

When someone falls, you who have the Spirit of Jesus in you must reach out to that person gently and restore that brother or sister to the Christian life. It may not take more than going to them and signaling that the church is willing to give them a second chance. It may not take more than asking "Do you love Jesus?" If you still love Jesus, there is still hope. Jesus still loves you. I still love you. Come back to the way. Come back to the family.

Remember the story of the prodigal son? He had planned to say to his father, “I am not worthy to be called your son, but take me back as an employee on your farm,” but the father never let the words get out of his mouth. The father covers him with kisses and says, “Let’s show everybody that this is my son! He was lost but now he’s found. He was dead but now he’s alive.”

Remember the story of the woman caught in adultery, caught in the act, dragged out of bed into the street to be stoned by the religious? Jesus says to the religious, “Let the person who has no sin in his life throw the first stone,” and they all leave. Jesus, the only one in the crowd who has the right to throw a stone, says, “I don’t condemn you either. Go and sin no more.”

Remember the story of Paul, who hated Jesus and was going after Jesus by going after his followers? The risen Jesus stopped Paul on the road to Damascus and asked him, “Why are you persecuting me? I have plans for you!” And everything changed. “The chief of sinners” became the greatest proclaimer of God’s grace through Jesus.

Those who fall into a hole can be lifted out. We who have Jesus’ Spirit must reach out to them and share their burden. “Bear one another’s burdens,” Paul says, “and so fulfill the law of Christ,” the law of love. That is true even if they are caught in a scandal. That’s who Paul is talking about in Galatians 6:1—those caught in a public scandal. We are so scandal-hungry these days. That’s what networks and magazines thrive on. Do we imagine that the command to restore them in a spirit of gentleness doesn’t apply to politicians or celebrities or priests?

What will it mean for us on the island if we really believe that our role is not to label people but to restore them? Is there anyone on this island who is beyond hope? I asked one of the eighth graders I went to New York with a question: “When did your class get labeled as bad?” “In the first grade,” he said. Someone needs to take each one of those kids to breakfast, one by one, and let them know that whatever they’ve done Jesus still has plans for them. Some people tell me that if they came into the church the walls would fall down. No, the walls that would fall are the walls around you. What makes them even joke that way? Why do they think that if they ever did meet Jesus he would nail them? Jesus took the nails for you.

Yes, there are people who have not been loyal to Jesus, just like Peter. They have gone back to their old lives, just like Peter. So what should we do? Drop them from the church rolls and wash our hands of them? Act like that’s their business if they want to walk away from Jesus? Or go find them where they are—even if they are buck naked on a boat—and tell them that Jesus is still wanting to know if they love him?

A couple of years ago a pastor from South Africa made an impact on me at a national Baptist meeting. Trevor Hudson, who had been through the trauma of apartheid and its end, but who has an incredibly tender heart, told us that when he was a young minister he interned with Gordon Cosby, pastor at The Church of the Savior in inner-city Washington. Before Trevor left to go back to his own country, he asked his mentor, “What one word would you have for me?” Gordon Cosby told him, “Trevor, never forget that whoever you are speaking to is sitting beside a pool of tears.”

I was sitting at the time beside my wife, whose mother was very close to death. During worship, sometimes a song or a scripture verse would remind Becca of her mother or father and a tear would roll down her cheek. We sat in a meeting with Kentuckians at the convention when they discussed the suicide of a youth minister we knew and again tears began rolling down Becca’s cheek. A woman sitting on the other side of her, a complete stranger, reached out to her and held her hand.

You do not know what the person sitting next to you is going through. You may not see the pool of tears there on the pew. When you hear that someone has fallen into sin and can’t get

up, remember that that person too is sitting next to a pool of tears. The sin itself is a terrible burden. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

An American professor told about visiting Albert Schweitzer in Africa when Dr. Schweitzer was 85 years old. In his younger days Schweitzer had been a great organist and musicologist, and a theologian, and then decided to go to medical school to serve Christ among the most needy in Africa. Now Schweitzer was 85, and one day he was walking up a hill with the American visitor when he suddenly strode across the hill to where an African woman was struggling with a huge armload of wood for her cook fire. He took the whole load of wood and carried it up the hill. When they all got to the top of the hill, the American asked Schweitzer why he did things like that, given the heat and his age. Albert Schweitzer looked at him and pointed at the woman and said simply, "No one should ever have to carry a burden like that alone."