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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
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The late Robert Kennedy once said that good judgment is the result of a lot of experience, and experience is the result of a lot of bad judgment. In short, none of us ever gets to possess that small measure of wisdom that we have, unless we have made a lot of mistakes along the way—mistakes, from which, hopefully, we have learned something. It is this “learning from life” that we might reflect upon this morning, taking Peter as our example—and see that saints are not born as such, but made—made in the school of trial and error. Simon, the one who denied and abandoned Jesus, becomes Peter, the one who leads, whose faith in Jesus is as strong as rock, as his name signifies. How do such things happen? Today's Gospel gives us a clue.

In this morning's Gospel we see the risen Jesus conversing with Peter, asking him three times, “Do you love me?” What is the significance of this question? Why ask it three times? The last time that Peter had seen Jesus before his execution was that fleeting moment in the high priest's courtyard as Jesus was being led by, moments after Peter had three times denied any knowledge of Him. That was the moment when Peter remembered the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, “Peter, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” So, now, a few days later, three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” The poignancy of that triple interrogation seems not to have escaped Peter, as with mounting frustration and anxiety, Peter answers Jesus for the third time, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Why does Jesus seem to put Peter “through the wringer,” and raise subtly, but unmistakably, the bitter memory of Peter's denial? Is Jesus doing this just to rub it in? Is it Jesus acting in the way that we sometimes do, trying to get our last licks in before finally we say, “Sure, all is forgiven.”

Of course, Jesus is doing much more here than simply making Peter squirm. Here we see a basic truth revealed: that before the prospect of a bright future can arrive, the past must first be dealt with, and only then can it decidedly be put behind, only then can it be buried. Unfinished business has to be attended to. We are so often disposed to act differently. After some argument or betrayal or disappointment, we may bury alive our hurt and pain and anger. We may try to smooth over these very unpleasant emotions, pretending, acting as if nothing has happened, while all the while the weeds of resentment and rage grow stronger and more tangled in our heart.

Here we see here how in the most gentle of ways, Jesus forces Peter to return to

the moment of his betrayal. We see the compassionate Jesus slowly draw Peter out of his tomb of guilt and shame to voice the truth that is more central than his betrayal—namely, his very real love for his friend and Lord, Jesus. Peter is confronted with his sin, and is forced to take responsibility for his deeds. It is not Jesus who needs to be told three times that Peter loves them. It is Peter who has to confront the painful memory of his betrayal. He must truly confront, then bury the past, and not just inter it prematurely, so that he can move on to the future.

What Jesus asks of us is that same honesty, that we face up to our moral failure or poor judgment, and not simply try to paper over it. We may feel as powerless to meet that challenge, as did Peter in those dark days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. But we can do as Peter did in the quiet of our hearts. In prayer, we can have something like that conversation that Peter had with Jesus by the lakeside. We can reflect upon those painful experiences with the risen Christ as our interlocutor, as our conversation partner, because, again, like Peter, deeper than our poor judgment is that love—our love for Jesus and His love for us.

Peter changed, and so can we. Before the shattering events of Holy Week, Peter was a man who was quite sure of himself, giving orders to the other disciples, even to Jesus himself—Peter thought he knew it all. But the recognition of his own moral failure enabled him to grow in understanding of the weakness of others. No longer the headstrong, imperious individual he once was, he would now serve as the one who with compassion would unite and reconcile the disparate elements of the fledgling church. Precisely because Peter had been forgiven, he was able to forgive others. Peter certainly made his mistakes, but he learned from his mistakes. He learned by honestly facing up to them.

Let us pray we can do as much, for such an ability is the stuff from which saints are made. May we all become saints, then, in that same style of Peter, because we, too, have learned from our experiences, both the happy ones and the painful ones.