

*God Is In the Reclamation Business*

John 21: 1-19; Acts 9: 1-20

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First Federated Church

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In researching today's two lessons I ran across an article about a pair of entrepreneurial brothers in Germany who are "recycling" what the Germans call *plattenbau*, literally "level-building." These "slab buildings" were constructed by the East German government in the 1960s when the communist country faced a severe housing shortage. The buildings were made of prefabricated concrete slabs that were put together to make residential apartments in a quick and economical way. These giant concrete "Lego's" could be used to build high rise towers or rows of low rise apartments.

After the reunion of the East and West these *plattenbaus* fell out of favor to such an extent that about a million unoccupied units. This is where the entrepreneurial Biele brothers enter the picture. In the *plattenbaus* they saw not the crumbling unoccupied remains of communism but *raw materials!* The brothers can buy the concrete slabs for next to nothing—usually the only cost is hauling them away—have their workers reassemble and bolt the slabs together, cut out windows and doors and finish the exterior to make single-family dwelling units at a construction savings of up to forty percent! These new homes reflect both German and California chic.

The Biele brothers have "reclaimed" discredited materials to build something useful. That is essentially the same thing that the Risen Lord did in each of our Scripture Lessons.

Recall the story in John's gospel how after the crucifixion Jesus appeared to the disciples. Many of the disciples, led by Peter, returned to their former way of life—fishing. Early one morning a stranger stood on the shore and called out to the disciples asking if they had caught any fish. When they replied that they had not, he told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Immediately their nets filled to the breaking point. It was then that Peter looked more closely at the man on the shore. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was Jesus!

Peter leaped into the sea and swam ashore, leaving the other disciples to wrestle with the catch. As he and the others approached Jesus they saw him kneeling over a fire cooking their breakfast. They simply didn't know what to say. Finally Jesus spoke to them, or to Peter actually.

"Peter, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Then feed my sheep."

A second time he asked, "Peter do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied.

"Feed my lambs."

And then a *third* time Jesus asked Peter; "Peter, do you love me more than these?"

Peter, grieved to the heart, perhaps he remembered how he had denied Jesus three times on that horrible night of his arrest, replied one last time, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep."

Some commentators of this exchange note that two different words for “love” are used in this exchange. Two times Jesus asked Peter for *agape* love. Peter replies with *philio* love—brotherly love. The third time Jesus asked for *philio* love. It would seem that while Jesus wishes to stretch our faith commitment, the risen Lord is willing to meet us where we are in our faith journey.

Turn, if you will, to our second lesson; to the story of a man named Saul. He held the coats of those who killed the first Christian martyr, a man named Stephen. He was a man of great pedigree, a blue blood in Jewish circles, a passionate believer and a great persecutor of the early Church that was simply known as “the Way.” He had in his hand papers giving him authority to track down members of the Way in Damascus, when in the midst of his journey he had a life changing occurrence. He was struck blind and the voice of One whom he had never met, but who knew his name, spoke to him in the midst of his blindness. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

The risen Lord told Saul to go into Damascus to the home of a man named Ananias. Unbeknownst to Saul, Ananias had a vision, a dream in which the risen Lord told him that he was to go to a certain house and touch this notorious persecutor of the fledgling Church. Reluctantly but obediently Ananias did as he was asked. He met Saul, laid his hands upon him and immediately something like scales fell from the blind man’s eyes.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me;  
I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see.*

Like the Old Testament patriarchs Saul took on a new name—Paul. God’s vehicle to reach beyond to Jewish-Christian community to the Gentile world.

The one thing that the stories have in common is that both Peter and Paul were “reclaimed” through the grace of God. Each man was solid in his own way. The first time that Jesus laid his eyes on Peter He knew that beneath his future denials, that Peter was “rock” solid. He was to be the foundation upon which Christ was to build His church.

And Paul? Paul was a Hebrew’s Hebrew—“a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. He was educated and eloquent, passionate and persuasive and all of these things would come to be reflected in his ministry to the Gentile world.

Do you remember the story of *plattenbau* homes in Germany? Unattractive but solid concrete structures were torn down and remade into attractive single dwelling family units. These lessons remind us that that is what the Risen Lord does. God is in the business of reclamation.

God does not waste any of Life’s experiences. Every strength, talent, and experience that we have—whether it is secular or sacred, good or bad—is a building block in the hands of the Risen Lord.

Author Dean Merrill once wrote about a visit to a shipyard on Lake Michigan. While there he saw one of the large freighters that roam the Great Lakes was being overhauled. He was surprised to see that it had been cut in two. When he asked one of

the workers what was happening, he was told that an “extension” was being welded into the hull of the ship. The extension would allow the ship to haul nearly twice as much cargo as it had before.

Reflecting back on that experience Merrill wrote in his book, *The God Who Won't Let Go*, “human beings get ripped apart as well.”

Someone breaks their marriage vows, a fifteen year old high school student suddenly finds out that she is pregnant, someone else mishandles corporate funds. In a single act, a single indiscretion, our lives can *seem* to be ruined. But that is not the way it has to be. Sometimes our brokenness can make us “bigger people in the end”. Our brokenness can enlarge our capacity to serve.

I know of a woman who had once been homeless who began a homeless shelter in her city.

*Amber Alerts* for stolen and missing children came into being as a response to the 1996 kidnapping and murder of Amber Hagermann. A neighbor heard her screams as a man in a pick up truck snatched Amber off of her bicycle and drove away. Four days later her body was found in a ditch. Her throat had been cut. Her parents vowed to do all that they could to make sure that such a thing didn't happen to someone else's daughter.

Six months ago the Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania had to deal with seeing their children held hostage in their one room school house. Before the day was over five of their young girls were killed by Charles Carl Roberts IV. The gunman, too, was killed. At his funeral about half of the seventy-five mourners were Amish. They used the broken thread of that tragedy to show the world the texture of Christian forgiveness.

This past week we were once again touched by at the senseless death of our young people. While we grieve for their families and those whose lives they touched, we have yet to see what good—if any—will come out of this tragedy.

Someone once said (*God*) *doesn't destroy the raw material of the lives we have lived, but instead recycles them and refashions them into something new.*

The challenge for many of our community is to take our life experiences, skills and talents and find ways to use them to help First Federated Church carry out its ministry. Someone once asked a question that I've thought a lot about over the years. The question is this, “If you do something well, why aren't you doing it for the church?”

As we “work out our faith with fear and trembling,” to use the words of the apostle Paul, our church program staff, Executive Board and Deacons are challenged how to give our membership permission to use their gifts in the ministry through this church.

You see, Jesus doesn't want our regrets but our raw material.

I was recently talking to someone who had come through a major life changing illness. As we talked he told me that he knew that he was a blessed man. Each day was a gift and he intended to use each day—no matter how many or how few—to serve God. Ronald Reagan made a similar statement in his diary after the assassination attempt on his life. “How ever many days I have left I am going to use them to serve God.”

Each one of us has been endowed with certain talents, insights and experiences that can be recycled by Christ for ministry and mission. All we have to do is to trust that the hands of the Master Builder will reshape us into the people that we are intended to be.

This means that we have to let go of our former shapes and styles. We have to enter into a new way of living. Our lessons today challenge us to change from being

frightened to forgiven, from being a Pharisee to an apostle, from being a worn-out apartment building to a beautiful single-family home, from being self-centered to be God-centered instruments of ministry.

Our strengths, talents, insights and experiences are as solid as those *plattenbau* pieces of concrete that are being used to construct new homes. Sometimes this reclamation project is painful, but as Paul said to the Philippians, remember this—*is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.:* (2:13)

The Risen Lord is in the reclamation business. With God, nothing is trash; it is, rather, *transformed*. To God be the glory. Amen.