

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Easter
May 4, 2025
Acts 9:1-20

"Master of the Second Chance"

Have you ever put your foot in your mouth “big time?” I mean, have you ever committed a gross “faux pas,” that you just wish you could get back, or forget? I’m sorry to say that I can remember a number of such instances, but the one that stands out for me happened when I pastored a church in San Francisco.

I have always tried to welcome new pastors into the community, because I know how difficult it can be to break in to a new area. When I received the news that a new Presbyterian pastor was coming to a nearby suburb, I decided to pay him a visit to make him feel comfortable. However, I’m not sure that I accomplished my mission, that day.

The new Pastor in question was Jeb Stuart MacGruder, of “Watergate” fame. Mr. MacGruder had completed his sentence related to Watergate, accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, and was recently graduated from Princeton Seminary. This was his first call to serve as an Associate Pastor. I noticed that some of my colleagues were not exactly greeting him with open arms and that made me even more determined to welcome him properly. I called and set up an appointment to visit him.

On the appointed day, I arrived on time. Jeb greeted me and invited me into his office. We sat and made pleasant conversation for a while - I asked him about his move from coast to coast, how his family was adjusting, was he liking California, etc. And then I decided to shift to a more professional mode and ask about his relationship with the staff at the church.

Now, there are numerous ways I could have asked him how he was getting along with his fellow staff members - “How are you getting along with your fellow staff members?” would have been a nice, simple question. But I had to embellish it just a bit, make it creative. Without thinking, I used a phrase that I had used often in other circumstances, but (trust me!) have never used again.

Looking Jeb Stuart MacGruder straight in the eye, I calmly asked, “Well, how are you and your ‘cohorts in crime’ getting along?” Right then I had an “out of body” experience.

It was like I was watching someone else make an absolute fool of himself. I saw myself uttering those words, knowing as soon as they left my mouth that they were a gross mistake. I watched myself turn crimson with embarrassment and blunder my way through an apology, “Not that you’re a criminal (uh oh, I’m getting in deeper)... anymore (did I really say that?).”

“This,” I thought to myself, “would be a perfect moment for a heart attack. Please, Lord, just take me now!” There was a long (at least it seemed so to me) period of silence, which Jeb finally punctuated with a hearty laugh to relieve the tension. I was grateful to him for his graciousness in accepting my apology, but that is an occasion I will never forget.

Whenever I get too full of myself or feeling too confident about my verbal skills, I remind myself of that incident to keep me humble. I would have given anything that day for a second chance in that meeting.

We’ve all been there, haven’t we, in some embarrassing or regrettable circumstance that we would love to be able to undo like on a computer? Unfortunately, real life doesn’t work like that.... or does it? The world doesn’t work like that, but who’s to say that the way the world does things is “real life?”

We who live in the bright daylight of Easter glory are taught another reality - the reality of the second chance. God offers us the opportunity to undo what we’ve done - giving us a second chance to get it right. And if that doesn’t work, we get another second chance. And if that doesn’t work, we get another second chance. There is no limit to the number of times we get God’s second chances, but it is to our advantage to get it right earlier, because then we get to enjoy life in all its fullness that much longer.

Nearly two thousand years ago, on a lonely road between Jerusalem and Damascus, God gave a second chance to a man who was the chief persecutor of Christians. This man believed that Christians were the scourge of the earth, who deserved to die. This man had single-handedly initiated a “wipe the church out” movement and he was doing a pretty good job of it. The man’s name was Saul, later to become known as Paul. And believe me, at that moment he was anything but a saint.

He had secured letters from the high muckety-muck in Jerusalem authorizing him to arrest all “followers of the Way” and return them to Jerusalem, for trial and execution. Saul was an educated anti-Christian with position, prestige and power - a dangerous combination for the church. Suddenly, on the road to Damascus, a heavenly light decked him - a thunderbolt knocked him to the ground and his whole world was turned upside down. Before being grounded he thought he had a clear vision of his purpose, now he was blind. Before being grounded he was a man of position, now his position was flat on his

face. Before being grounded he was powerful, now he was powerless. Before being grounded he had all the answers, now he had only questions. Second chances do that to you. Getting a second chance makes us question who we are and what we are doing.

Back when I was at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary as a second year student I made a huge mistake. I presented my ethics professor, Dr. Dunn, a paper some of which I had copied without attribution to the author. Later it wasn't lost on me that I had violated educational ethics in an ethics class. I knew what I had done was wrong and that I could suffer severe consequences for plagiarizing. I had all sorts of reasons why it was ok for me under the circumstances, chief among that them I probably wouldn't be caught. But I was caught and called into Dr. Dunn's office to face the music. I thought my seminary career was over. The only thing I did right that day was confess to Dr. Dunn what I did.

I waited for his judgement. And this is what he said. "Mike, I'm disappointed in you. You have such promise for ministry but this is a serious offense." Dr. Dunn continued, "You will of course receive a failing grade on this paper, but I'm giving you a second chance to live up to your promise in this course by not reporting you to the administration. But I expect far better from you in the future."

HOLY SMOKES! Or HOLY SPIRIT! You have no idea how relieved I was. I was expecting to be expelled in disgrace but instead was pardoned by grace. From that moment on I tried to live up to Dr. Dunn's gracious second chance.

That's what a second chance does for us. It affirms us and sets us on the right track. That is certainly what it did for St. Paul. Even though blind and powerless, he was more in control of his life than he had ever been. For those of us who have lived on the dark side of life, Saul - Church Public Enemy Number One who became St. Paul, Church Leader Number One - is an inspiration.

But what if we can't relate to Saul? What if we've been basically a decent person all of our life? What if the mistakes we've made have all been minor ones? What do we do with this story if we don't feel very much like Saul?

Look to Ananias. He is the other character in this story who often gets overlooked. Ananias gets a second chance, too. His second chance comes when he judges Saul. When God tells Ananias to go to Saul, he balks because everybody knows what kind of man Saul is. No decent Christian would be found within ten feet of him. But God gives Ananias a chance to reconsider his judgement of Saul. It's a second chance for Ananias that results in a second chance for Paul.

God uses Ananias to impart His blessing on Saul and set him on his first missionary journey. God has a second chance for everyone, even those who may think they are not in need of a second chance. In the same way that Ananias' second chance proved to be the

key to unleashing the ministry of one of the great leaders of the church, our second chance from God, our reconsidered judgment, may provide the impetus for someone to embark on a life of service.

Many years ago, a British family journeyed to Scotland for a summer vacation. The mother and father were looking forward to enjoying the beautiful Scottish countryside with their young son. But one day the son wandered off all by himself and got into trouble. As he walked through the woods, he came across an abandoned swimming hole, and as most boys his age do, he took off his clothes and jumped in. He was totally unprepared for what happened next. Before he had time to enjoy the pool of water, he was seized by vicious attack of cramps. He began calling for help while fighting a losing battle with the cramps to stay afloat.

Luckily, it happened that in a nearby field a farm boy was working. When he heard the frantic cries for help, he brought the English boy to safety. The father whose son had been rescued was of course very grateful. The next day, he went to meet the youth who had saved his son's life.

As the two talked, he asked the brave lad what he planned to do with his future. The boy answered, "Oh I suppose I'll be a farmer like my father." The grateful father said, "Is there something else you'd rather do?" "Oh, yes!" answered the Scottish lad. "I've always wanted to be a doctor. But we are poor people and could never afford to pay for my education."

"Never mind that," said the Englishman. "You shall have your heart's desire and study medicine. Make your plans, and I'll take care of the costs." So, the Scottish lad did indeed become a doctor.

There is more to this second chance story. Some years later, in December of 1943, Winston Churchill became very ill with pneumonia while in North Africa. Word was sent to Sir Alexander Fleming, who had discovered the new wonder drug, penicillin, to come immediately. Flying in from England, Dr. Fleming administered his new drug to the ailing prime minister. In doing so, he saved Churchill's life for the second time. For it was the boy Winston Churchill whom Alexander Fleming had rescued from the swimming hole so many years before.

We never know what second chances might lead to. My second chance (BTW, not the only one I've received!) has led to 50 years of pastoral ministry. I'll bet that all of you could tell your own version of a second chance story.

The reason I know that is that the church is made up of second chance people who receive and also give second chances not by chance but by design. The church is designed

to be a second chance place for second chance people who owe everything to our second chance Master, Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen