

[You're Going To Need A Bigger Boat](#)

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by Rev Paul Graham

Read John 21:1-14



Once upon a time there was a little girl called Little Red Riding Hood. One day, while walking in the woods, she met a wolf who had recently opted for a human-rich diet. Thankfully, with the timely intervention of a woodcutter, Red was able to go on her way. Wolfie, bruised but undeterred, strolled off deeper into the woods and turned up at Red's dear old white-haired grandmother's house. A few chomps later and Wolfie, as can only happen in these sort of stories, dons Grandma's nightgown and bonnet and takes up residence in the old woman's bed, awaiting Red's arrival.

Red duly turns up and goes through the usual rigmarole of pointing out the increased size of her Grandma's eyes, the hairiness of her hands (seriously, how thick is this girl?) and the size of her teeth. By this point, Wolfie has grown tired of speaking English (again, something that no-one ever seems to question in these stories), and leaps out of bed ready for dessert (Little Red Crumble, anyone?)

Just then, the door bursts open and our heroic woodcutter returns to the stage, ready to do Wolfie permanent and fatal damage with his axe...

...but Red stops him and says, "No, don't kill Mr Wolf. Let him live, in spite of the wicked way that he gobbled up my dear old white-haired Grandma and was willing to have me for dessert."

And, so saying, Red not only saves Wolfie's life, but then goes on to sign over to him the deeds to her late grandparent's cottage and allows him free reign to pick any of the clothes from the wardrobe that he fancies.

The woodcutter, more than a bit baffled at this turn of events, leaves the house, scratching his head and wondering if he'd have better luck at the house of 3 little pigs. Meanwhile, Red and Wolfie live happily ever after...

Many years ago, I used to do school assemblies as a member of a team of youth workers. Among our greatest hits (literally) was the assembly that culminated in me smacking one of my colleagues in the face (pretend, of course), with him spraying stage blood over the front row of pupils. There was a point to this assembly, but it largely got lost in the gasps and shock of the blood-spattered audience.

However, what one of us had to do following this set-up was then to expound on the point, illustrating in some way how Christian morals or ethics could have more of an influence on their young lives. When not involved in hitting my colleagues in the face, I was sometimes given the job of doing this bit – never as interesting as the action that preceded it, but vital for getting the message across. Unfortunately, I got into the habit of prefacing my *spiel* with an apology for what had just occurred. Though this was probably quite necessary (certainly to the poor parents who had to wash the stained shirts), it used to get me into trouble with my fellow performers, who felt (justifiably) hard done by that I felt the need to apologise for their efforts.

Stick with me on this, because there is a point to it. Firstly, the best assemblies were the ones that shocked people – leaving a hall of blood-spattered students is usually memorable for all kinds of reasons. Secondly, the story at the beginning also illustrates the unexpected nature of what we understand to be normal or familiar in a way that our reading definitely shouldn't be.

I'll explain. We are possibly quite familiar with the story of today's reading: Jesus hosts a beach barbecue for his disciples, not just providing the cooking equipment, but also the ingredients to cook. Of course, it's a miraculous catch of fish that Jesus commands, but that's par for the course for any of us who have followed Jesus' exploits on earth. So that shouldn't really shock us, though it's not the norm for most of us when thinking of a bit of al fresco dining.

But if that isn't shocking enough, what we usually miss is the most controversial aspect of the whole story. Why on earth should Jesus do any of this? After all, it was these same men who had abandoned him in his hour of need. Not only had they slept while he needed them for comfort, they had scarpered at the first sign of an arrest warrant. Even worse, Peter had had the temerity to deny all knowledge of Jesus, despite the evidence of his Galilean accent and clothes setting him apart from the cosmopolitan set in Jerusalem.

So, why should Jesus want anything to do with his disciples? A bit like the traditional retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, the disciples should face the same consequences as Wolfie – punishment for killing Grandma is only what is deserved. Justice at the hands of the woodcutter and his axe should equate to the eternal punishment for those who abandoned the Messiah as he was led away to Golgotha.

But, just as in the reimagining of the fairy tale above, Jesus shocks us by generously blessing the wayward disciples with food and forgiveness. Read on further into John's Gospel and you'll see how he and Peter sorted things out. Jesus gave the disciples not what they deserved but what they definitely didn't. They had no right to be accepted back into the fold given all that they had done on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

And here's where we get the third shocking aspect of this story. Jesus didn't even wait for them to say

sorry; there's no record of an apology from the disciples in any of the gospels. You'd have thought that if it had happened, one of the four writers would have included it, but no, we're left with Jesus and Peter talking about sheep and lambs to get close to any hint of remorse on Peter's part. Instead of me who couldn't stop apologising for assemblies that didn't warrant it, there is no indication of the disciples doing anything of the sort. And they really needed to. Or so you would have thought.

And that's a huge challenge to us. Jesus' forgiveness and generous welcome to the disciples is one that we would do well to mimic with others. Only we usually wait for people who have wronged us to make the first move.

We also cannot ignore the dual challenge of 2 Chronicles 7:14 when it comes to repentance and forgiveness. "If my people," says God in the verse that we continue to wrestle with. "...turn from their wicked ways" is one of the conditions that God asks of his people in order to forgive and heal. And yet in this story we only see Jesus forgiving sins and healing the relationships between himself and the disciples. So, what does this all mean?

I think, for once, the answer isn't "Jesus" as every Sunday School teacher would encourage, but rather Peter. For me, the key to this story and its shock value for us is not just in the actions of Jesus in providing such generous grace, but also Peter in his actions.

I don't know about you, but my usual habit when coming face to face with someone who I have done wrong to is to be a bit reticent to look them in the eye, shuffle my feet nervously and try to think of going somewhere a long way away from them to save my embarrassment. Certainly it isn't to leap out of whatever mode of transport I happen to be in at the time and go charging towards them with a big grin on my face. And, as at the time of writing, I haven't gone as far as denying someone's friendship as they face imminent execution.

But that's precisely what Peter does. Leaping from the boat, swimming/splashing his way to shore, he is desperate to be with Jesus. And, if we take 2 Chronicles to heart, doesn't that sound just like "seeking his face" as well as "turning from your wicked ways"? That's the sort of enthusiasm for Jesus that few of us would probably say we've experienced. And if you're one of those who have, I'm sure that it's marvellous. For the rest of us, it lays down a daunting gauntlet.

The demands of 2 Chronicles 7:14 aren't light or frivolous. They're daunting, because some of us quite enjoy some of our wicked ways, and Jesus is sometimes quite difficult to seek out, and even praying can feel like hard work. But, when taken in conjunction with the excitement, exuberance and generosity of today's story, surely it's worth the effort? For that, I make no apology.

Amen.

(Photo by [Martin Schalter](#) on [Unsplash](#))
