

**Acts 3:11-21 (Third Sunday of Easter—Series B)****“Strike 3! You’re Safe!”****Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT****April 18, 2021**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the First Reading from Acts 3:

<sup>11</sup> While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s. <sup>12</sup> And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. <sup>16</sup> And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. <sup>17</sup> “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup> But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. <sup>19</sup> Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, <sup>20</sup> that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, <sup>21</sup> whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

There aren’t very many experiences that are truly universal, but I’ll bet I can think of one. I’ll bet that everyone here has played baseball, softball, or whiffle ball at least once. And I’ll bet that everyone who has played has struck out.

What do you remember about how that experience felt—striking out? You’ve waited in the lineup for a long time to get a turn at bat. Now that it’s finally your turn, you have to walk out there all by yourself. Standing there at the plate, swinging your bat around, you might feel kind of tough. You’re the one with the big plastic, wooden, or aluminum stick, and you can just imagine yourself plastering that ball and blasting it over the fence. So you step into the batter’s box; you get yourself set. You look toward the pitcher and . . . bam! The ball snaps into the catcher’s mitt and the umpire calls, “Strike 1!”

Oh, that feels so stupid! How could you have let that go by? You got distracted. You weren't paying enough attention. You straighten up and wiggle the bat. You swing it over the plate once, right where the ball should be, and you get set again. This time you're ready as the pitcher winds up and throws and you *swing* the bat with all your strength! You swing so hard it makes you step forward out of the box, but you realize that you did not hit anything. You tried so hard you closed your eyes and the ball went right past you.

Now it's trouble time. You've got two strikes. Your teammates are rolling their eyes. Your coach is yelling at you. Your parents are sitting in the stands looking concerned and a little sheepish. You know you've got only one more chance. You can't afford to mess this one up in front of everybody. This time you're going to do everything right! The right stance. The right grip. The right concentration on the ball. You don't even take your eyes off of it as it leaves the pitcher's hand, but you're not sure. Is it too high? Is it a little outside? Is it going to be a ball? And you hesitate for just that split second, and then it's too late. The ball goes by you and snaps into the catcher's mitt, and you're standing there with the bat still on your shoulder.

It's the worst feeling in the world. Your heart turns to wax as the umpire yells, "Strike 3!" He doesn't have to yell, you know. You're standing right next to him. They only do that to rub it in. And you have to drag yourself back to the silent dugout. It's not like you went down fighting. It's not like they had to throw you out. There was no burst of running and blaze of glory. Just a long trudge back to the condemning glances of your teammates.

You know what it means to fail. You know how it feels in that moment when you realize what you've done. Do you remember the lecture—maybe it was only a few sentences,

but it felt like it lasted for hours, as if they were just laying on the guilt. “Didn’t I tell you about this?” your father asks. “Don’t you know better than to do that?” your mother lectures. “Honey, didn’t you promise me? Haven’t we been over this before?” your spouse says to you for the hundredth time. “I thought I told you,” your boss says. “Weren’t you at the meeting? Weren’t you paying attention? Do you have any idea how much this is going to cost the company? And do you realize what that might mean?”

I’m sure it only lasts a minute—maybe even less—but it feels like a hundred years. It feels as if every word is dropping another load of bricks onto your back. It feels as if you’ll never recover from your failure.

If you know that feeling, then listen again to our Scripture lesson where Peter is addressing the crowd. Peter and John have healed a man who was born with crippled legs, and it was such a remarkable miracle, such a startling miracle, that everyone is running around talking about it. The man himself is walking and leaping and praising God. And now, in this happy crowd, Peter gives them “the business”:

When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. *You handed him over to be killed*, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. *You disowned the Holy and Righteous One* and asked that a murderer be released to you. *You killed the author of life*, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes

through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see" (vv 12–16, emphasis added).

We saw what you did, Peter says. God finally sent the answer to all of our prayers, and you killed him! "You handed him over to be killed": strike 1! "You disowned the Holy and Righteous One": strike 2! "You killed the author of life": strike 3!

Imagine the crushing impact of Peter's words. They were caught in their rejoicing and excitement, and their happiness was turned into shame. The Jesus who had made this man walk was the very same Jesus whom they had killed. The One whom God had appointed was the very One whom they had betrayed. The One whom all the prophets had announced and for whom they had all been waiting expectantly was the very same Messiah whom they had disowned, denied, beaten, and killed. "You killed the author of life."

"*But* God raised him from the dead." Peter laid the burden of the Law on the shoulders of his now silent listeners. He crushed them with the truth of their sin. But then he opened a tiny window of hope.

A man named Don once recalled how it was when he worked for his father in the family business. The other men in the shop sometimes liked to have a little fun with the boss's boy, so they made a trophy out of broken parts and old drills and awarded it to him. "Head Scrap Maker," it said. That didn't bother Don; they all made mistakes sometimes. What bothered him was his father's response. Don didn't care what the other guys thought, but he knew that if he made a mistake and ruined an expensive tool or an important project, he'd have to go in to the office and tell his dad. His dad wouldn't yell at him; he never did that. Instead, he would get his headache look and say, "Oh, Don." That's all he'd say, but Don felt

so small because he knew that he'd let his dad down. Don knew he'd cost the shop a lot of money and there was no way he could ever make it up.

But then, sometimes his dad would do what Peter did. He'd puzzle over it for a while, and then he'd say, "Well, let's see what we can do." And he'd get up from his drawing table and lead Don back to the shop. Don's heart would be in his mouth because he knew his dad could fix anything. Instead of making Don figure it out, he was going to take the blueprints and explain to him where he went wrong. Then he'd take the tools and the machinery and walk through it all again. Don and his dad would do it over together, and he'd make it right. When his father came alongside of him and fixed his mistakes, Don knew that he wasn't just forgiven; he was loved. And all the other men in the shop stood by and kept their mouths shut. They could never tease Don when his dad was there.

"You killed the author of life," Peter said. And like a bomb, his words must have destroyed their last hope. "But God raised him from the dead!" God fixed what we had totally destroyed. "We are witnesses of this," Peter told them. And look at what He's done. He's repaired this man's withered and shriveled legs and made him dance for joy. And now He has this new life for you as well. No matter how badly you've failed, no matter how deeply you've stained your life, no matter how completely you've shattered your hopes, "you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers." "When God raised up his servant, [Jesus,] he sent him first to you to bless you." You're still God's children. You're still welcome at home.

"Strike 3!" You know what that means. It means it's all over. You're a failure. You're totally and completely out. No more chances. But God Says, "Strike 3: You're Home Safe!"

In spite of your sin, in spite of your failure, in spite of the stain you could never remove, your Father forgave you. And more than forgiveness, your Father loved you. He patiently, lovingly, and resolutely worked out His great plan. Over the centuries, He laid every piece in place, and at last He gave His beloved Son. And God, your Father, fulfilled every promise He had made to purchase you back from sin and death through His Son, Jesus, your Risen Lord and Savior. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Donald O. Neuendorf, senior pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan. From *Concordia Pulpit Resources* Vol. 16, Part 2. April 23, 2006. Edited for use at LCOR, Enfield, CT.