

Forgiveness Can Be Hard to Come By John 21:1 – 19

Forgiveness is no piece of cake. Forgiveness is hard. This is a story about forgiveness and how it happens, so let's dig into the feast of forgiveness Jesus offers by the seashore.

The story begins in failure: "That night they caught nothing." Fishing all night and catching nothing sounds like the way life has been going for the church lately. We recover from one conflict, and we fall into another one. Some churches stumble from conflict to conflict as if conflict is what energizes them and keeps them going.

This has been going on in the church from the beginning. The church and conflict always are mixed. Maybe you think those early churches were perfect, but you need to rethink that. The church at Corinth divided into factions. Then they were wracked by sexual immorality, then they were in conflict over class and economic divisions, and then they wrangled over the Lord's Supper with the rich members drinking all the wine and refusing to share with the poor members.

The church was barely off the ground when there was a food fight in Acts. The Greek widows complained that the Hebrew widows were getting more bread. Then the church has a knock-down drag-out fight over who can be a member of the church. Listen again to how that ancient fuss got started: The apostles and the brothers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had accepted the word of God. When Peter went up to Jerusalem, those who argued for circumcision criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to those schmucks and eat with them? (11:1-3). I use a coarse Yiddish expression because these Jewish Christians are angry. Same kind of fights we still have today. Have you heard Louie Armstrong sing, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen;
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen;
Glory, Hallelujah!

John's story is the conclusion of the biggest trouble that ever came Peter's way. He was really hurting because he had hurt Jesus so badly. Peter shed many a tear over his denial. I think our problem is that we have never been taught how to have a good fight in church. It's like no one ever said, "Now, I want a clean fight, no biting, no low blows, no kicking, no name calling, no

bullying. When the bell rings, come out and fight." People have fights at work and the next day they go back to work. They work it out. People have fights in the family and they go back to being family. But fights in church seem to be a different category. We get stuck. The pain sticks to us. We can't move on. Some folks can never seem to get beyond the trouble, but here's Jesus making all the arrangements to help Peter out of his trouble. This is what Jesus does.

Peter does everything in his power to avoid the confrontation with Jesus. Peter says: "I'm going fishing." There's always something to do if you don't want to be in church. A lot of church members now claim to be spiritual but not religious. If you are one of those people who now claim you are spiritual but not religious, it will be hard for you to hear God calling your name, because you are not in church where God calls his people by name the most often. Baptist theologian, Barry Harvey, posted on Facebook to a person asserting that the church was inessential to Christian discipleship, these words:

"I have no doubt that you feel things very deeply, but I would caution you that you have yet to understand the importance of the church. The community has little to do finally with intense feelings or experiences. Beware of false dichotomies, e.g., "it's a good thing to own your own faith rather than to say, 'I'll just take that on faith'." Sooner or later America and the global market will leave you alone and unsated, with few or no one around you to whom you are bonded in ties thicker than family or nationality. Spiritual but not religious does not give us a St. Francis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, St. Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Fannie Lou Hamer. Being a disciple is something you learn with others, not something you feel by yourself. It has to do with the bonding of courage to faith, prudence to charity, persistence to hope."

Jesus draws his disciples into the circle of love with a meal of fish and bread. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. Every meal with Jesus was a sacramental meal.

Nothing says religion like a meal. Nothing makes possible a deep conversation like a meal. After all, we are a religion of meals. Our founding faith, Judaism, has more meals and feasts and festivals than we can count. One shared Passover meal should bind us together forever. It has always been about the food.

After the meal, the hard work begins. That's what forgiveness and repentance entail – heavy lifting, hard work. It's about how much we love

Jesus not how much we have against a brother or a sister. Jesus didn't preach Peter a sermon on repentance, he asked, "Do you love me?"

Three times Jesus asked. Three times Peter said yes. Three times Peter denied Jesus. Three times Peter refuted the denials with "I love you." It has dawned on me that forgiveness must have an atmosphere to happen. Let me give you an analogy from physics: Two neutrons and two protons form the helium nucleus. The fused helium nucleus weighs just a bit less than the two neutrons and two protons from which it is formed – 0.7 percent, in fact. In our universe has been just a bit larger, say 0.8% there would have been no stars, no sun, no solar system, no earth, no humanity. If it had been smaller, say 0.6% fusion would have not occurred and the universe would be only a collection of hydrogen atoms. Our universe has to get these numbers exactly right. Our universe has done exactly that over the billions of years.

Love provides exactly the right atmosphere for forgiveness. I think we miss how important it is for our lives to be soaked in the love of Jesus before we can receive forgiveness. Love has work to do. It is what Paul calls "knowing," a discernment of the body. Love work is slow, difficult, painful, and requires a passionate patience. Love's work is deciding to start over again with other stubborn, difficult people. But we are gifted with the strength to do love's work in the meal we share. This meal enacts the body of Christ.

I think this is how it was at that breakfast with Jesus. The disciples were deeply moved. There were tears and heart-felt confession and repentance. I think it was so deeply moving that John shifts his story in a sudden jolt. The last verses of the story move away from the deep emotion. Jesus tells Peter about his future. 21:18 "Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 21:19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." After that, Peter did follow Jesus to death. I have always disliked this verse because it sounds like what is in store for me. One day, when I am really old, and I'm preaching, the police will come for me and take me where I don't wish to go: The nursing home. In any event, today I preach that love precedes forgiveness. I preach this love with the same passion of St. John, whose later epistles are filled with "love one another." The story goes that when John was really old, when he was going, he kept repeating, "Love one another." "Love one another." I can't think of a better way to end a life of preaching. "Love one another."