

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 21:1-14

Sermon Title: "A Serious Weapon for Healing: Forgiveness" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

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Forgiveness is one of the core values we hold in our Christian faith. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful weapons against sin that God gives us. It is the weapon that God the Father gives us through Christ the Son, so that we don't stand at odds with others or God. Forgiveness repairs broken relationships and fortifies love. Without forgiveness, we are dead. There is no love, no relationship. There is no attachment to God, and therefore no heaven, no afterlife. We understand how important forgiveness is to our existence here on earth and afterward in heaven. And yet, forgiveness is one of the core values we try to neglect. We try to bypass forgiveness at times, because we are too embarrassed to ask for it and even too stubborn to give it.

We read about Peter and his friends in John 21. Peter is fishing with men he has known for years as disciples of Jesus: Thomas, Nathaniel, John (the author of this Gospel) and his brother James, and two

unnamed disciples. They are working on the Sea of Tiberius, or the Sea of Galilee, way north of Jerusalem, and it is only days after their Teacher Jesus was crucified. It might seem callous of them to go back to work right after Jesus' death, as though nothing had happened for the last three years, as they followed Jesus. In their mourning they try to keep themselves busy, trying not to think too much and cry too much. These men have got to miss Jesus terribly, but they don't want to dwell on their grief too much, so they go fishing. It was once their main occupation.

It is at this point that a man appears on the shore of the lake. He is Jesus in his resurrected body, but the fishermen don't realize this. Jesus calls out, "Children, have you any food?" "Children," Jesus calls them. That should have tipped them off right away that it is their Teacher speaking with them. But they don't catch the words. They just answer, "No."

Jesus tells them to move their nets to the right side of the boat, so they can catch more fish. This happened before on the same lake(!), when Jesus first called Peter and James and John as disciples.¹ Jesus told them to fish somewhere else, and they did, and they could hardly fill the boat with the fish they caught. Once again, Jesus tells them to fish

¹ Luke 5:4ff.

somewhere else, and they do, and they can hardly fill the boat with the fish they catch. Finally, the disciples get it. Actually, it is John himself who says, “It is the Lord!” Then Peter jumps into the water to swim to shore.

Before we go on, though, we were discussing forgiveness at the beginning of our talk. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful weapons against sin that God gives us. Notice Jesus’ posture on the side of the lake, when he calls to the men. He is a bit deceptive about not telling them who he is at first. Jesus doesn’t come out and say, “Look who it is? Do you recognize me? I am Jesus, and I have risen from the dead.” Jesus never tells them who he is, but lets them figure it out for themselves.

By the same token, Jesus doesn’t stand on the shore angry with arms crossed and steam coming out of his ears. He never says, “Hey, look who it is! Do you recognize me? It’s Jesus, the guy you ditched back there in the Garden of Gethsemane! The guy whom *you* said *you* would follow to the bitter end, but ended up throwing me to the wolves! Yeah, that guy! Thanks a lot!”

Any of us, in Jesus’ condition, might have felt abandoned upon being arrested. We might have felt as

though our friends didn't care about us, that they were more concerned about saving their own hides. Any of us, in Jesus' condition, could have been doubly sore toward Peter, who said he would never deny Jesus but did three times. Peter swore at people when they wanted to attach him to Jesus.² Peter tried his hardest to distance himself from his Teacher. In Luke's Gospel, it says that Jesus looked at Peter after the third time he denied him.³ If it was one of us, that would have been a look of disgust and infuriation. Not Jesus. His posture after Peter denied him and while he stands on the shore of the lake is that of forgiveness. Jesus sees his men, and he feels the need to mend relationships and fortify love through forgiveness.

But that was Jesus, and he was perfect. Surely there is no way we can forgive as Jesus did. Well, in a way, we cannot forgive as Christ did, because we are not perfect like him. However, we may still follow his example and forgive nonetheless. That takes having the perspective that *we don't have to be right*. I was sitting in my backyard on a cool spring day, and I was contemplating why we find it so hard to forgive others.

² Matthew 26:73-74 and Mark 14:70-71.

³ Luke 22:61-62.

It hit me: maybe it's because we have pride that tells us we have to be right. "I have the right to be angry. I have the right to hold bitterness toward another person, because he or she hurt me badly. I am the victim, they are the attacker. I should stay irritated and feed off of it." That is the problem: we hold on to our rights to feed off our anger, and eventually our anger feeds off of us and devours us whole. There's nothing left but a lump of annoyance and hard-heartedness, when we don't forgive.

We might be angry about something, especially if some injustice has occurred against us. Jesus certainly could have been angry with his disciples for ditching him, and for Peter to disavow, reject, Jesus three times. But Jesus did not declare the right to be right. He never declared the right to justify his anger that would not have solved anything. Forgiveness gives us the chance to keep from being right, so we can do the right thing.

My kids do something I don't like, and they receive some sort of a punishment. And if any parent is like me, there are times our children have done things that really upset us. We cannot believe they did such a thing, and we may remain upset for some time. But my kids come to me and say, "I'm sorry," and it melts my heart. I cannot stay upset. I cannot remain in my

anger about what they did. I must forgive. Their apology demands that I forgive. Forgiveness gives us no right to be right. Forgiveness push ego aside, tells pride to take a hike. We can keep no records of wrongs, but move toward healing.

In our story today, the disciples and Peter had no chance to ask forgive when they saw Jesus. They didn't know it was Jesus to begin with. But Jesus held on to no anger. He who was and is full of righteousness did not dangle the disciples' sin in front of their faces, but prepared himself to receive them on the shore with a warm fire and a warm breakfast, once they realized who he was.

Now we get to Peter. The story in John 21 shifts after John gets a clue and says, "It is the Lord," and all attention is placed on Peter and what he is going to do next.

This is the guy who really sinned. He said he was going to stand by Jesus no matter what came down the pike, and he choked. He ran away just as the other disciples did. He swore and made oaths and rejected Jesus as somebody he had never seen before. Peter felt deep guilt and sorrow for what he did. When he heard that Jesus was standing on the shore, he must have felt the impulse to do something. He had to

get to Jesus as soon as possible, so he jumps into the water, leaving behind his fellow fishermen to deal with the nets.

Notice that John's Gospel says that Peter got dressed *before* jumping into the water.⁴ He took off his outer garment while fishing – most, if not all fishermen did this. It's like hairy, burly men who mow the lawn outside without a shirt on (and by the way, they really need to wear a shirt). Peter didn't have clothing on that would impede his ability to fish. The other men might have been looked the same way. Yet, he goes through the process of getting dressed in order to jump into the water and swim. All the safety manuals and all the lifeguards tell us that we should de-cloth ourselves when swimming in water. We should take off our pants, make knots in the legs, fill the pants with air, and use them as flotation devices. It is better to be swimming in our underwear than in sopping wet clothes that will weight us down, and even drown us. Peter gets dressed, and then he enters the water.

Why is this? Does it have something to do with forgiveness and our egos getting in the way? When we forgive, we deny our rights in order to restore relationships and love. When we ask for forgiveness, we again deny ourselves our rights in order to restore

⁴ John 21:7.

relationship.

A professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary had preached on this John 21 text, and she suggested that Peter got dressed because he did not want to be seen naked before Jesus. This preaching professor pointed back to Genesis 3, when God asked Adam and Eve why they were hiding, and Adam said because they were afraid that God would find them naked.⁵

It is unbearable to be naked before God with all our sin. It is unbearable to ask for forgiveness from God or anybody, because our fault is right out there in the open for all to see. We have to acknowledge that we are the guilty party. We have to admit that we are not perfect, and nobody (not politicians, not businesspeople, not parents, not any normal person) wants to admit that they are flawed. We would rather stand before God and even others sopping wet and bogged down with all our sinful clothing.

Peter stands on the shore, clothes dripping with water, all alone with Jesus. And what does he receive? A warm fire. Warm food. Warm companionship. It is amazing what doors open to us, when we stand vulnerable before another person, naked before God

⁵ Genesis 3:9-10.

with our sin. It is amazing what we receive, when we apologize for our wrongdoing. We receive warmth. We receive nourishment and comfort. We receive another chance to start again with somebody – even to start again with God – and build on that relationship and love we have for each other.

When you get out of the water on a cool morning, with dripping clothes on, you have got to be cold. Bone-chillingly cold. You have to take off the clothes and put them next to the fire. That's what Bear Grylls does when after jumping in a lake of freezing water. That's what Peter must have done after exiting the Sea of Tiberius. That is what we have to do when we ask for forgiveness: take off the heavy, sopping clothing of sin, and lay it next to God's fire.

Jesus invites Peter to sit beside him. Jesus invites all the disciples to come and eat. There is no discussion of the past: how the disciples ditched Jesus or how Peter blatantly lied about knowing his Teacher and Friend. Peter does get a little remedial instruction to correct the problem of denying Jesus three times. We didn't read this today, but after everybody sits down for a fireside breakfast, three times Jesus asks if Peter loves him. Peter doesn't get why Jesus is asking him these questions. He says, "You know that I love

you, Jesus. You know everything.”⁶ This is forgiveness that is occurring between the men. Denial of Jesus was a terrible sin. Such denial got Judas to hang himself out of deep guilt and responsibility. Thank goodness Peter didn’t go the same route. Jesus asks Peter to let go of what had occurred between them. He is asked to move forward with the new resurrected Lord, and to carry out great ministry even after Jesus is gone. Jesus asks Peter to love him, and all of God’s children, forgiving them of their wrongs in order to live wonderfully in God’s light.

Forgiveness is one of the core values we hold in our Christian faith. It is the most powerful weapon that God the Father gives us through Christ the Son, so that we don’t stand at odds with others or God. Without forgiveness, we are dead. With it, however, we live. We come together to enjoy warm fires, warm food, and warm fellowship. And then we take that warmth of forgiveness to others, and invite them to join the party.

⁶ John 21:15-17.