

“The Forgiveness Encounter”

John 21:1-19

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+21:1-19)

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“Forgive Everyone Everything”

The Apostle Peter failed to stand by Jesus.

In this small portion of Holy Scripture we find a forgiveness encounter of profound proportions. Within these few verses a model of forgiveness and restoration of relationship is given to us. For us to fully understand what is happening, we need to go back to the week before the crucifixion. Jesus warned Peter that he would be tested. Peter asserted his complete allegiance to Jesus. Peter said in no uncertain terms that Jesus could count on him even to follow Him into death itself. Peter assured Jesus that he would stand by Jesus even if all the others ran away! During Judas' Garden of Gethsemane betrayal, Peter seemed to be willing to lead the revolt against Rome. It was Peter who raised his sword and attacked one of the members of the crowd who had come to take Jesus to prison. The drawn sword was as courageous as Peter got; however. Following Jesus from a distance, Peter loses all faith in Jesus and all courage in himself. When a servant girl asked Peter if he was a follower or even an acquaintance of Jesus, Peter denied ever knowing Him. Three times Peter denied Jesus. (John 18:17, 25-27) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+18:17; 25-27) When the rooster crowed, Peter remembered Jesus' warning and ran out into the dark night of depression, shame, and guilt.

Can you identify with Peter? Have you ever let someone down? Have you embarrassed yourself by not living up to your own ethical and moral standards? Have you let a close friend or family member down by your lack of courage or loss of faith?

I can sure identify with Peter. So can the Apostle Paul who says in Romans 7:18-19 (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+7:18-19), “*What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise.*”

- I know that I can engage my mouth before my head is in gear. The result is often an excellent example of poor judgement.
- I know that I can flippantly and off handedly make a comment that carries with it a hurtful message that I never intended.
- I know that I can decide to stop doing something that is destructive to me and go right out and do it again the same day.
- I know that I can overstate something and leave others questioning my compassion, mercy, or honesty.
- I know that I have a tendency to respond to a question with an historical and philosophical analysis that never gets around to answering the original question.

I know some of the potential problems with speaking this honestly. A young preacher was openly and vulnerably sharing his heart with the congregation. He asked them if any of them felt they were stupid. Then he suggested if they felt stupid to stand up. After a very long minute, little Johnny from the second grade stood up. The preacher asked, “Do you think you are stupid, Johnny?” “No Sir,” he said, “But I hate to see you standing up there all by yourself.”

I am very aware of how Peter and Paul speak and act. In a very real way they live within me and within you. We are united with them as one human being to another. I can understand what Peter did in the High Priest courtyard. Can't you? I can understand Paul's misuse of anger and his tendency towards self-promotion. Can't you? I can understand how a person can say one thing and do another. Can't you?

All of us, at one time or another, need forgiveness. None of us is perfect. None of us lives up to the standards of our faith all the time. If you are alive and living in a relationship with another human being, then you will at some point need forgiveness. Therefore, this model of a forgiveness encounter is for all of us!

There are three critical parts of forgiveness. There is the element of God's hope that is alive and at work in our lives. There is the element of honest repentance that is necessary for restoration of the relationship. Finally, there is the love action that reaches out to others. Let's look at each of these key ingredients of forgiveness.

GOD'S HOPE: Forgiveness is a motion picture experience, not a still frame photo.

Life continues to change with each passing moment. No event lives on unchanged. No relationship stops at one point and does not continue. Life is a motion picture where God's continuing creative hope brings about new opportunities and new visions.

We get into trouble when we treat life and relationships as if they were still portraits. The movie, *The Big Chill*, is all about this tendency. A group of radical college students from the Ann Arbor of the Sixties meet again in the mid-1980s to attend the funeral of one of their friends who has committed suicide. In one way their lives stopped in the heady days of protest. In another, their lives kept going. The movie is about their task of sorting out their relationships with the hope of going on to a better way of relating with each other. Even their relationship with Alex, their dead friend, seems to continue to change as they seek to find hope and forgiveness with each other.

Life can be filled with hope if we allow God to be at work! Hope dies when we stop the camera and make a still picture out of the last frame of the movie. Think about Peter and Jesus. What if Jesus stopped with the picture of Peter's denial in the courtyard? What if the last thing in Jesus' mind is the hurt and pain of the betrayal of Peter? If Jesus chose to stop the movie in the Jerusalem courtyard of Caiaphas, then this breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee would not be possible.

Have you stopped believing in God's hope in relationship to your spouse, your child, a friend, neighbor, work associate, church member, or even your Pastor? Do you have a still picture in your mind that you are unwilling to let it grow into a movie?

God's hope is always alive! This forgiveness encounter of Jesus and Peter demonstrates how far God will go to restore a relationship. There is a marvelous promise of hope in Holy Scripture. The Apostle Paul speaking of the forgiveness of Jesus for all of us says, "*God sets things right. God also makes it possible for us to live in God's rightness.*" (Romans 3:26) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=romans+3:26) God did not give up hope for Peter. God does not give up hope for you! You can place your hope in God and not give up on someone else!

RELATIONSHIP REPENTANCE: "Do you love me?"

Let us affirm that God can set things right. Our resurrection hope is lived each day when we affirm the reality of God's rightness within our lives. This is not some sentimental, romantic feeling. Forgiveness involves the hard work of repentance. Dennis Prager writes in the *Wall Street Journal* (reprinted in the *Readers Digest*, March, 1998, p.37) a challenge to our romantic notions of forgiveness. Prager was concerned by a group of high school students in West Paducah, Kentucky who will forgive a fellow student for murdering three of their friends even before Michael Carneal, the killer asks for it. True repentance is necessary for forgiveness to be authentic.

We are forgiven by God when we accept God's love and seek to grow in a love relationship with God. True forgiveness begins with God. There is much that we cannot forgive. As humans we find it impossible to reach out a hand and forgive some people for some of the pain they have caused in the world. But, God can and will forgive through us. This issue in all forgiveness is the relationship.

Relationship repentance begins the process of healing. God heals you. As you remember that great gift of healing, you can be more loving towards the one who has harmed you. The issue is not the content of the conflict! The issue is the broken relationship. Jesus did not go back to Peter and ask him why he did what he did in the High Priest's courtyard. Jesus did not seek to understand Peter's motivation. Jesus knew that Peter carried a great shame burden upon his back. Jesus knew the real issue was a restoration of the relationship. Out of God's great love, Jesus offers Peter the gift of love restored, fellowship renewed, and a relationship begun again on a deeper level.

There is a balance here. Remember Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus unburdens Peter of his shame by seeking Peter's love commitment three times. Repentance is hard, but necessary to restore the love! Husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and neighbors, even church members and Pastors, need to begin with the understanding of God's forgiveness and proceed to offering forgiveness to each other with a simple, but profound willingness to repent, to say "I'm sorry," to seek to repair and restore with greater love the relationship that may be broken.

LOVE ACTION: "Feed my sheep!"

The restoration of the relationship through the gift of forgiveness is not an end in itself. Peter is not forgiven so that he can feel better! Peter is forgiven so that he might share the incredible, miraculous love of God with others. Jesus challenges Peter to get out beyond himself and share God's love with others. Jesus invites Peter to share God's forgiveness.

Perhaps you know that you are living with a broken relationship with a person. Let me challenge you today to pray about that broken situation. Forget who is right and who is wrong. Forget the content of the argument that brought about the brokenness. Go to God in open and sincere conversation with trust in God's resurrection hope and discuss the broken relationship that is burdening you. If God leads then take the coupon you have in your hand and write a message of hope and love and send it to that special person. In other words, get involved this week in God's forgiveness activity!