

“How Can I Forgive Myself?”

This is where the healing begins, part 4

John 21:1-19

Welcome, friends. You are in the right place. You have chosen to be somewhere important – the house of God. And in case you might think you are here to find a bunch of perfect people, let me be the first to inform you, that’s not us. We are a bunch of ragtag disciples, broken people who are trying to keep it together. The miracle of it all is, somehow, with God’s help, we can do just that. We can grow together, learn together, love together. So I just want to express my thankfulness for your presence, which is both a gift to me and a pleasing sacrifice to God.

Would you please pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we come to you today without pretense. You know us better than we do ourselves. Help us to lay our burdens down, to come to you and find joy and abundant life. Help us to see the people we can become when we let your Holy Spirit invade our lives. We are open, and we are ready. Come, fill us. We ask this in your precious name, O Christ. Amen.

Would you do me a favor? Turn to your neighbor and tell them, “No matter what, God forgives you.” Go ahead.

For the past few weeks, we have been talking about various types of healing – through prayer and confession, through releasing anger and embracing forgiveness, through loving our enemies and our families, no matter how imperfect they are.

Did you notice something about each of those messages? They have been outwardly focused. That is, each of the three previous sermons dealt with our

relationships with others and how they impact our relationship with God. There is, however, a trio of characters we have left out: “Me, myself, and I.”

Now, before you tell me, “Wait, pastor, Christianity is all about loving others!”, let me explain. I propose that the most important person we can ever forgive is ourselves. All other forgiveness flows from our own. If we are to embrace the cross and understand what Jesus has done to redeem us, we must understand how we can forgive ourselves.

I think that the hardest person to forgive is yourself. Unlike a mutual relationship, forgiveness of self means you have to think simultaneously in two roles. Like a courtroom trial, in the realm of self-forgiveness, you have to act as both the prosecution and the plaintiff, simultaneously.

Trouble is, most of us are better at condemning ourselves than receiving mercy. Have you ever had a moment when you just screwed up? I did. A few years ago, in a rush to clean up some candles for an Ash Wednesday service, I got sloppy with a knife and cut the tendon on my right middle finger. It will go down in my personal history as one of my worst mistakes, ever.

However, most of our mistakes have to do more with our mouths than our hands. Have you ever fought with a friend? Did you ever say something arrogant and hurt someone’s feelings? Have you ever opened your mouth wide enough for you to put both feet in? I have. My favorite philosophical question is, “If a man is alone in the middle of the forest, and he says something, is he still wrong?” In my case, probably.

The Bible has a word for all these mistakes in which we hurt others and ourselves. They are called “sin.” Oof. I can almost feel your reactions as I say that. “Sin.” Why are we afraid of that word?

First, let me explain what I mean by “sin”. Sin is disobedience to God’s will for our lives. We are broken, selfish people, who insist on our own way, not God’s way. We live in a “Me first” world. Have you heard of the Ten Commandments? Every commandment ever broken was for selfish reasons. Perhaps we don’t like to talk about sin in the church because, deep down, we all know we are guilty, and our pride won’t let us admit that we need help.

One of the things we do when we encounter our own sin is rationalize. We make up our own version of Christianity, a checklist of “do-s” and “don’t-s” trying to check off more of the “do-s” than “do not-s.” You know what that all amounts to? A bunch of doo-doo. Christianity is not a list of rules; it is a relationship. The trouble is, relationships are hard work. They are messy. We need help from the Almighty Counselor to deal with our sin and our pride.

That’s why I love John, chapter 21. This is a beautiful story of how Jesus restores Peter and deals with Peter’s pride. If you don’t know, Peter is infamous for denying Jesus three times the night before the crucifixion. (Luke 22:54-62) Peter was broken. What kind of a best friend publicly denies that he even knows you?

Jesus knows that Peter screwed up, and in the passage we just read, Jesus does something about it. We see Jesus, resurrected, talking with the disciples on the lake. They went back to what they knew: fishing. Jesus helps them gather a miraculous catch, and then Peter, trying to prove himself once again, jumps out of the boat and attempts to haul 153 fish to shore by himself. It’s like Peter is saying, “Look at me, Jesus! Look how good I am!” Pride raises its ugly head again. And Jesus knows that that attitude will not grow his church. No way.

Why is Peter acting this way? The same reason we try to deny our own sin. How often do we try to overcome the past by just committing to do better, instead of dealing with the root of problem: forgiving ourselves? We think, “If I can just hide it by drawing attention to something else, something I’m good at, maybe, just maybe, God will forget what a screwup I am.” It’s foolish, it’s backwards, and we’ve all done it. Thankfully, Jesus gets Peter to forgive himself. It’s a beautiful thing that we can learn, too.

Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me?” This the most important question ever. Do you love Jesus? Your answer to that question will determine the trajectory of your life, and all your eternity. Do you love Jesus?

Peter, naturally says the “correct” answer. “Why, yes, of course Jesus, I love you!”

“Great,” says Jesus. “Feed my lambs.”

Peter assumes the problem is solved, but Jesus asks the same question again. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (Notice, Jesus is using Peter’s full name. We know this is serious.)

Peter once again answers, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

“OK,” says Jesus. “Take care of my sheep.”

Jesus isn’t done yet. A third time, he asks the very same thing. I swear, when my parents thought I wasn’t listening, they would do this, too. Repeat it, saying your full name, because if they have to repeat it, you will know they are serious.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. Without saying it explicitly, Jesus has just given Peter a threefold opportunity to confess his love and make up for his threefold denial. Peter finally, gets it. The Bible says Peter was actually hurt by the third question. And he replies, “Lord, you know all things. You must know that I love you.”

(This part is not in the Bible) “Yes,” Jesus thinks, “but you needed to hear yourself say it.”

Peter would have lived the rest of his life in the shadow of his own failure. How could he get the church to trust him, when he could not even trust himself? Peter knew it, Jesus knew it, and together, they worked out a solution, which in turn led Peter to teaching others about the grace of God. Think of it. How did anyone know that Peter ever denied Christ? Peter himself must have told them his story, and how Christ saved Peter from himself.

So what? As I titled this message, “How can I forgive myself?” What does this passage teach us.

Start with this: nobody’s perfect. Are you, like Peter, trying to impress God and others? Stop it. Give up your quest for perfection. This is one of my struggles, too. Let’s all agree that we are all human. Let’s agree with Romans 3:23 that we are all fallen and all sinful.

Next, we must admit to our self-serving pride. We must confess our brokenness and admit to our guilt. Like Peter, we have all denied Christ, whether in word or in action. Until we can see that in ourselves, there will be little incentive to want to change.

OK, so we are broken, sinful, proud people. But God still loves us. God still passionately desires for us to have a loving relationship with God. God still wants us to worship God with all that we have.

Can you be that honest with yourself? Can you see yourself the way God sees you? A precious child. A person worthy of love. Someone who is redeemable.

Someone once said, grace means, “God’s riches at Christ’s expense.” If we could just take ourselves off of the judge’s bench, and let Christ do for us what we cannot do, that is, save us, then we can let the healing begin.

Remember, Jesus found a way to get Peter to forgive himself. We can, too. Also note, that the journey doesn’t stop there. What did Jesus say? “Follow me. Feed my lambs.” Who are the lambs? God’s church.

When we learn to forgive ourselves, we can share that forgiveness with others. This then is the greatest challenge, the greatest purpose that we can ever have: To tell the world about the forgiveness of God Almighty through the crucified and resurrected Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Church, we have a job to do. There are many, many people out there who can’t forgive themselves. They may be addicted, divorced, angry, bitter, indifferent, full of regrets and burdens they try so hard to hide. If I had a dollar for every time someone ever told me, “I’m too ashamed to come to church,” I’d be rich.

So let’s do this together. Let’s practice forgiveness, starting with ourselves, and extending out to all. We are here to serve people, out of gratitude for what the Lord has done for us. We cannot earn our salvation. If we try to, that’s pride,

that’s jumping out of the boat half-naked and dragging the fish up to shore by ourselves. Stop it. Instead, serve because of the joy you feel of being forgiven.

There is no reason for us to hold on to our pride, anyway. Do you know what the church is? One beggar telling another where to find bread. That’s God’s people.

Church, we are all in this together. Our purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world. To achieve it, we must start by helping others know the forgiveness that Christ offers them, too.

Think of your friends, your neighbors, and your relatives. Do you want them to know the forgiveness of God, to know new life? Forgive yourself, and tell them what God has done for you. Then, invite them to come and experience it for themselves.

One last thing: I’m not interested in a church that recruits to save itself. People are not interested in joining an organization. No, what I hope to see is a church that gives itself away, the way that Jesus gave himself away for us. Don’t worry about “attracting” people to the church. The world isn’t here to save the church. The church is here to tell the world about a saving relationship with God, and about the forgiveness we have received.

Let us pray.

Memory Verse: 1 John 1:9 (NIV) “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Reflection questions:

1. Recall a time when someone forgave you. What did that feel like?

2. Have you ever felt that you have denied Jesus? When?
3. Have you ever needed to forgive yourself? What was that like?
4. How can you follow Jesus’ command to “feed my lambs”?