

John 21:15-19

“A Way Forward in Love”

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Back in 1970 one line in the movie *Love Story* stirred up a friendly cultural debate. Returning to each other after an argument, Ali McGraw says to Ryan O’Neil: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.”

If this is true, maybe Jesus and Peter didn’t actually need to talk after breakfast. Maybe they could have just called their relationship “good” without drawing it all out in words?

A church member in another congregation once confessed to me that this was how she handled a dispute with her husband. Once she realized that she had been in the wrong, she retold the story of their conflict in a few different friend groups while he was within earshot. “As I told them the story, I would say that I was sorry. I did this often enough that *he* must have heard it!”

The Elton John chorus comes back to me: “Sorry seems to be the hardest word!”

It’s possible that Peter had already apologized for denying he knew Jesus and for running away before the crucifixion. It’s possible that the two of them had had some opportunities during this period of post-resurrection appearances to reconcile. But we don’t know this for sure from any of the Gospels. What we *can* be sure of is that Jesus had already forgiven Peter. Certainly this occurred for him as for *us*, upon the cross when the dying Savior said, “Father, forgive them.” All of humanity was caught up in this forgiveness.

So why this one-on-one with Peter on the seashore?

I’m happy to share my own answer. It seems to me that Peter needed something *more than* to say he was sorry; he also needed something *beyond* Jesus’ forgiveness.

In the classic tale, *The Scarlet Letter*, the town’s pastor, Arthur Dimmesdale, had had an affair with Hester Prynne that he couldn’t admit, and from this union came a child that he couldn’t acknowledge: Pearl. Hester took all the blame and the punishment, never identifying the father. Arthur kept his own guilt a secret and carried the shame *inside*, making himself sick.

As a Christian pastor, Dimmesdale certainly loved Jesus and he knew that God through Christ had forgiven him, but *he* couldn’t forgive himself or find a way to go forward in love.

I think Peter, too, needed help to go forward in the love he genuinely felt for Jesus. Since Jesus had forgiven him, what was next? He wanted a direction to go and something to do. He needed a practical way to follow Jesus and live out this love.

Marvin Dixon, a colleague in ministry, shared his own story of grace and redemption in his book *That Saved A Wretch Like Me*.¹ While he had been raised in a

¹Marvin Dixon, *That Saved a Wretch Like Me* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993).

loving family and been baptized at age ten, Marvin got into trouble as a teenager. After several arrests as a young adult, including prison time twice, he found himself in the depths of guilt and depression, desperately searching for a real experience of God. After a long and winding road, he started attending worship services at the prison chapel, and upon hearing Ephesians 2:8, he finally felt the reality of the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.²

His next question was what to do with this and how to go forward. God answered his prayers through the prison chaplain who summoned him out of the blue to his office and invited him to become his assistant. This one step led to another and another. Our paths crossed at seminary. He later became the pastor of my grandmother's church!

Jesus gave Peter *and us* what we need after forgiveness: a way to go forward in love, and it is to love others in his name.

Even during this pandemic! *Since* we love Jesus, we can feed his lambs – look after the well-being of children and youth in this unprecedented time. *Since* we love Jesus, we can tend his sheep – make virtual visits, send cards, deliver care packages safely. We can watch over those in need, make donations, re-open wisely, and participate in policy as citizens. *Since* we love Jesus, we can feed his sheep – through both the food pantry and inviting others to the spiritual nourishment available in our worship services. *Even staying home* can be going forward in love!

²Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God.”