

John 21: Jesus and Peter on the Beach

God is present at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet.

—Simone Weil

This chapter is an add-on to John's Gospel, and it is about practical, hard, and down-to-earth forgiveness, the really difficult kind that comes with the destruction of relationships, the killing of human beings and hope, the violence of the world and our fear of it, which cause us to betray our best intentions and cast us headlong into despair. This is about Peter's betrayal of Jesus, but it is about all of us human beings who do terrible things and must live with one another ever after. And it is about the church and the pragmatic necessity to be honest about sin and evil in its members, its leadership, and as a community and how we live in collusion with evil that eats at the heart of many who seek to live faithfully, but are discouraged by those who claim to be faithful followers of the Crucified and Risen Lord, and yet do such terrible things to one another or do nothing to stop the pain and the evil all around us.

But it is good news! And it is a story of hope, reminding us that absolutely everything in the world is redeemable because of the Father's raising Jesus from the dead in the power of the Spirit. There is a Hassidic tale that will set the stage for this last account of Jesus's appearance after his resurrection for us. I call it "Someone Waits," and it is one of the Baal Shem Tov's ("The Master of the Good Name") stories, so it is more than two hundred years old.

Once upon a time there was a man who came to visit the Baal Shem Tov, intending to become one of his disciples. But the Besht (as he was called) told him that his path lay in another direction—that he was a storyteller, but that he was welcome to stay with him for a year and he would keep him

close to him, including him among his closest disciples. He was to listen and watch and collect stories that he was to spend the rest of his life telling. It was a year unparalleled in wisdom, in wonder, in marvelous things to behold, in songs, stories and visions, encounters with strangers and so many believers who came to hear the Besht, to ask his counsel, and prayers, to tell of history's events and to see how the Besht responded.

One day the Besht called him over and told him to be silent and to collect another story for his memory. Soon after, a very distraught young man came in and poured out his soul, saying that he was a Jew, but had become a Christian, lured by greed and material wealth and power in the city. Now he was very rich, but he had lost his soul and his community. What was he to do? There was a long silence, and then the Besht told him, "You must remain a Christian outwardly in your practice, but in your heart you must do penance and be a Jew, honoring the God of your ancestors and the covenant. Give away your money to the poor year after year and someday you will know that you are not only forgiven, you are freed from your bondage to your sin. Now go and do as I commanded you." He leaned over the man, put his hand on his head, blessed him, and whispered a final bit of comfort into his ear. The man wept and turned and went back to his life.

There were so many stories, the man wondered if he would remember them all, but the Besht told him that the Holy One, blessed be His name, would remind him of the stories as needed. And the time came for him to go. He was reluctant, and yet he knew that the Besht saw into peoples' hearts and he was a storyteller and it was his way. He left with a blessing and the memories of that year. And he traveled the roads of cities and countries, among the rich and the poor, illiterate and well educated, and he told stories. There were times of famine and drought, persecution and exile, and still he made his way telling stories of truth, of hope, of laughter and joy, marvelous, unbelievable, fanciful tales, whatever was needed. He was paid in food and drink, shelter and clothing, friendships and places to stay spread out across half of eastern Europe. And he grew old and wondered if his old master, the Besht, was still alive. Times had grown very hard. It was winter, and there was no money, nothing extra, and so there were many places he went that were not interested in stories. They were too busy just surviving.

One night he was so hungry and tired, exhausted from traveling and fighting the wind and snow and inhospitality. He tried telling stories in a tavern, and the barman suggested that he'd do better elsewhere. But where, he asked. The man told him that just outside of town there was a huge mansion and inside lived an old man who would pay for any story he'd never heard before, and probably he'd get fed while he told his collection. Off he went and found a house well lit, a huge winding driveway, and servants at the door. He announced that he was here to tell stories and was ushered into a long dining room with one long table, heavy dark curtains, and food and drink and candles laid out. It was a banquet! There were only two chairs, one at each end.

He was fed and the table cleared, and then the owner came and sat at the end of the table with a stack of kopeks, and he stayed seated at the other end. "Tell," he was commanded. And he did—story after story after story. And the coins were slid down the table, the stack slowly being transferred from one end of the table to his end. He'd have enough to live on for months, a year at this rate! But the man who listened, and he did listen intently, never showed any emotion, never responded. He only sent a coin down the table if he had not heard the story before. Nothing moved him. And the teller began pulling out all his best stories and telling them with all the power he had, trying to get the man to respond. Nothing. And the night wore on, and dawn came. And he was spent, out of stories, but richer in money than he'd been in years. It was time to go.

He rose from the table and for the first time the man reacted. He rose and said, somewhat panicked, "Is that all? Are there no more stories? You don't know any others?" "No," the teller answered, "I can't remember another one." "Please," the man begged, "think, any one at all." "I'm sorry," the teller replied and started to leave. The man was right next to him now, begging, pulling on his arm. And then he remembered that young man who was a Jew, but betrayed his belief and the covenant for wealth and power and lost his soul.

"Ah, yes, there is one more, but I doubt if you'd be interested." The man's glare told him to get on with the telling. He did, exactly as he remembered it, describing the Baal Shem Tov, his time with him, the man who came to visit, and as he spoke, the man actually started to respond. He breathed deeply, swallowed, his eyes brightened. He became agitated, then attentive, and then he began to weep, tears running down his face. The teller could not think of why; he ended the story with the Besht blessing the man and bending down to whisper in his ear. And at that point the man spoke, finishing the teller's tale. "Yes," he said, "that man is me. And the Besht whispered that on the night that someone came and told me this story, I was forgiven, I was free and that all restitution and amends had been made. I was a Jew again, at one with my people and with God. Your story has liberated me from these long, long years of hidden pain and bondage. Blessings on you!"

They say when this story is told (very, very rarely) that it is stories that save us and that somewhere someone waits for yours, for the one you will tell that will set another human being free, and there will come the moment when your eyes and your words bring another back to life. That person is out there now waiting for your story, and when you meet, all history will shift and hope will reign again in that part of the earth.

This is what we must bear in mind as we read these last stories in John, and we must remember that always they are about us too and our need to practice this resurrection life begun in our baptisms, imitating among ourselves

what Jesus does with his disciples and Peter, so that we retain the integrity of the gospel and the commitment to our baptismal promises that is essential if we are to preach the gospel to the world. Evil is not just out there. It is in us, and among us, and we accommodate our belief to its power, betraying our relationships to the Crucified and Risen Lord. The following are a few statistics recently published in the *Casa Maria Catholic Worker* newsletter.

More children have died in Iraq than the combined death toll of the two atomic bombs in Japan and the ethnic cleansing of the former Yugoslavia.

The U.S. has used sanctions of food and trade/investments against Vietnam, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, and other states that have not complied with our wishes.

The U.S. has used more chemical weapons against other countries than has any other nation, including Iraq. It used them in Vietnam and Cuba and tested them on its own soldiers without their knowledge.

Israel has an estimated 60–80 nuclear warheads. They are pointed at every Arab capital and at nuclear facilities in Pakistan and some states of the former U.S.S.R. (from *Z Magazine*)

Sin and evil are realities worldwide. We are responsible for ours individually and collectively, within our nation, our institutions, and our church, in our collusion with others and the effects that they have on others by force and example as Christians and Catholics who profess publicly belief in forgiveness, nonviolent resistance to evil, love unto death, and justice with mercy. We are called to lay down our lives for one another and for what we believe in, but we are not called to kill anyone in God's name, for any reason. And we are not to kill hope in others, or kill the presence of God and the call to discipleship in others by our cowardice and sin. This is the hard edge of resurrection, the practice with all our hearts and souls, minds, strength of forgiveness and reconciliation, restitution, and atonement—in a word, the gospel.

Peter vehemently denied Jesus publicly in words, and all the disciples, men and women, abandoned him and betrayed their relationships with him. We all do. We have all been forgiven so many times that we cannot begin to count them. We are commanded to forgive so many times that we do not try to count: everybody, for everything, all the time, no exceptions to the rule. And some things are infinitely harder to forgive than others. By now, many people know the story of Bud Welch and his daughter, but it is a good place to start; it is about as hard a thing to forgive as most of us will ever have to face. It is a story that is about death and about life after it, and about resurrection life in the face of death that has torn a hole in us (like the wounds of Jesus) that will not ever be fully healed. The scars are always there, and they must be looked at and faced with the Spirit of God.

Bud Welch lost his twenty-three-year-old daughter, Julie. Before that, life was simple. In his words, "I had a little girl, and I loved her a lot." He ran a gas station for thirty-four years in Oklahoma City. Then on April 19, 1995, his Julie and 167 others were killed in a bomb explosion that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Building. The day she was killed, he found out that she was about to announce her engagement. He is clear: all his life he opposed the death penalty, but that changed on April 19. He describes what he was like inside afterward.

The first four or five weeks after the bombing I had so much anger, pain, hatred, and revenge, that I realized why, when someone is charged with a violent crime, they transport him in a bullet-proof vest. It's because people like me would try to kill him.

For months his life fell apart—he smoked and drank—and then he went to the bomb site and stood there, thinking about Timothy McVeigh. He wanted him dead, but he also started thinking whether he'd feel any better once he (and any others involved) were executed. He writes:

Every time I asked myself that question, I got the same answer: No. Nothing positive would come from it. It wouldn't bring Julie back. After all, it was hatred and revenge that made me want to see them dead, and those two things were the very reason that Julie and 167 others were dead.

This was the first step, and he once again began to come out publicly against the death penalty, for Timothy McVeigh or anyone, for anything. It wasn't the answer. And in the process of constantly standing up for what he believed, he also had to come to grips with forgiveness. It began with a television program that he watched that tried to interview Timothy McVeigh's father. The man wouldn't talk to the interviewer, but just looked up for a moment with eyes filled with pain, and Bud Welch recognized that look. He knew it intimately. He had been living with that kind of loss, sorrow, pain, and hurt for months. That day he decided to visit McVeigh's father.

They met in the man's garden and talked, picking weeds, and then went inside to meet his daughter, Jennifer, who was twenty-four. There were pictures on the wall of all of them and Tim's high school graduation picture. His father had trouble talking and had told him earlier that he couldn't cry, but when Bud commented on the photograph, he cried a little. They talked together the three of them, all in awful pain for over an hour and a half, and then Bud got up to leave. He shook hands with Timothy's father and extended his hand to Jennifer. But she did not take it, instead she grabbed him and held on and hugged him, weeping. He describes it:

I don't know who started crying first as we embraced, but we were both in tears. Finally, I said, "Honey, we're in this together for the rest of our lives. And we can make the most of it, if we choose. I don't want your brother to die, and I'll do everything in my power to prevent it." Never in my life have I felt closer to God than I did at that time. I felt like a thousand pounds had been lifted off my shoulders.

He did not want to meet Julie's killer and wasn't sure that he'd forgiven him. It was a daily struggle that exhausted him. He would find that he had fits of rage and anger and terrible feelings about Timothy McVeigh, but he was sure he did not want him executed. He wants to forgive him and has said that if he were to die, that it will be too late to choose to forgive him.

It's a struggle, but it's one I need to wage. In any case, forgiving is not something you just wake up one morning and decide to do. You have to work through your anger and your hatred as long as it's there. You try to live each day a little better than the one before. [Story and notes taken from NPR interview and Johann Christoph Arnold. *Plough Reader* (Spring 2001): 21–23, quoting from sections of his book, *Why Forgive*]

Timothy McVeigh is dead, executed, and hundreds of people must deal with their pain and emotions and whether or not they will forgive. We all have to live with what has happened to us and what we ourselves have done to others. On some things, there is no closure, only as Bud Welch called it, "a hole in your heart that doesn't close." This kind of forgiveness is hard, hard as nails, and yet it is a power given with grace by the Spirit and a practice of a lifetime. It is a process. It deals with feelings, but it is not based on feelings, but actions and responses. And because of that, Bud Welch did forgive, even if the words never actually were spoken silently or aloud.

The practice of gospel forgiveness involves four steps:

1. Forego. This means to forego retaliation, revenge, the expression of anger, hate, resentment, attacking, doing violence, vengeance, and letting your emotions control your actions. This takes discipline and is hard to do alone. We need a community that helps us, holds onto us, and sometimes restrains us, and allows us to vent our feelings and reactions with them, calming us and acting as a buffer zone.
2. Forebear. This is long term, bearing our pain with grace, bearing our share of the burden of the gospel's command to forgive. Forbearing is bearing the cross and filling up with what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Forbearing is sharing in others' pain in solidarity and communion with others. When members of families who lost loved ones in the bombing of the World Trade Center towers went to

Afghanistan to meet with families who had lost loved ones in the U.S. bombing against their country, many came back realizing that they were not alone in their pain, and while they had lost a child, a husband or wife, a relative, most of their Afghani counterparts had lost so many, whole families, three, four, and five children, aunts and uncles, cousins. It did not stop the pain, but put it in perspective and gave them others to bear the burden with.

3. Forget. This is choosing deliberately not to dwell on what was done to you, what the other person is like, and what you'd like to do to him or her. Stop it in your mind. Begin to pray for that person, even just saying the Our Father over and over again, or Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us all. And pragmatically making new memories so that the sight of that person does not immediately bring to mind what he or she did, or what we think he or she did to us (these are general suggestions to follow in all cases where we must forgive; in some instances it is only prayer that we can do at this stage, either because of circumstances or what was done to us or those we love).
4. Forgiveness. This is a gift, returning the favor of the gift of God to us and passing it along to others. We need to forgive for our own integrity and humanness. And it frees us, as God has freed us. It is given on behalf of another. We are called to live under no sign of power, but the sign of the cross, and that sign and power is forgiveness. It stretches our minds and hearts, our souls, to include more and more people. It is the practice of mercy giving, of being a merciful person, of living in the mercy of God, leaning on the mercy of God, and as it is given, giving it again.

This is a long introduction, but a necessary one to this last gospel account and appearance that was born of the experience of the early church that struggled with forgiveness, learning with time that it is the core of the gospel, baptism, and resurrection life. After two thousand years it is still hard to practice and live with all our hearts, but this is the Word of God showing us how to do it, and it is graceful and freeing always.

Religion consists of God's question and our answer.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

This is a Resurrection appearance along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, unique to John's tradition. The first part appears to be a fishing story, much like the one where Peter goes fishing and cannot find anything, and Jesus tells

him where to find the fish. Peter's response is to see himself in the eyes of Jesus, as a sinner. Listen to Peter's being called to be a disciple and a missionary in Luke.

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him in the boat were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:6–11)

This story is familiar to us, but strange. Simon Peter is a fisherman but it seems all too often that he isn't all that good at his profession. They'd been out all night and caught nothing. They are tired and frustrated, and here comes a traveling preacher who gets into their boat and then tells them to cast out into the deep for a catch. They obey, even though they do not think much of his suggestion, and are overwhelmed by all the fish. Peter's response is to fall on his knees and declare that he is a sinner and that Jesus should depart from him. He hasn't done anything wrong. He has committed no sin, and yet what he says is all too true, not only for himself, but for all of us. Defining oneself as a sinner is acknowledging a state of being, of being less than what we claim to be or not living as a human being must, in right relationship to God, to others and to the earth, living holy, wholly devoted to obedience to God, especially for Peter, who is an Israelite, a member of God's chosen people, bound to Yahweh, his God, in covenant and law. Jesus's words, and the effect they have had on him, their power over the seas and what dwells in them, his very presence, have touched Peter in his depths (like the sea's own depths that he was commanded to launch out and cast his net into). Thomas Merton writes succinctly, "People are in every way prevented from getting inside themselves. Our greatest problem is fear of depth." And in this circumstance, Peter is in over his head. He senses something in Jesus, something more fully human, something holy. And in relation to Jesus, in Jesus's presence, he stands and kneels, knowing his own lack of humanness and grace.

Yet, Jesus assures him, by name, that he has a new vocation, a mission, not with fish, but with people, in Jesus's company and that he has no need to be afraid. And Peter, James, and John leave their boats and follow him into another life. Jesus has earlier, before the catch, taught the crowds from Simon's boat, because the people were pressing to hear the word of God. Peter

has heard and has been drawn into the net of God, and he has no idea what lies ahead of him.

This story, in many ways, foreshadows Simon Peter's life. As a fisherman, he is Simon. An encounter with Jesus changes everything, alters his direction, plumbs his depths and reveals him to himself in the gaze of God in Jesus. But he has a long way to travel before he understands any of this. In the first chapter of John, it is his brother, Andrew, who brings Simon to Jesus. There are only two sentences, and they are life changing and both threatening and transformative: "He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' [which is translated "Peter"]" (John 1:42–42).

One look and Peter is seen, known, and his name and identity are changed forever. He is taken from his father's lineage and becomes a part of a foundation of Jesus's making. Oftentimes *cephas* is translated as "rock," perhaps because of Matthew's story of Peter being the rock of the church (Matt. 16:18), and the image in Mark's Gospel where Jesus turns on Peter who has become a stumbling block on his way to Jerusalem and the cross, and calls him Satan, the hinderer who does not think like God, but who is trapped in human designs (Mark 8:33). In this story, Jesus again looks at Peter, who is in the process of remonstrating with, or rebuking, him and turns on him ferociously, along with the other disciples. Again and again, Peter gets that look from Jesus: warning, searching, disappointed, demanding, asking, and more often than not, Peter misses its intent or refuses and turns away. Peter's walk with Jesus is not always that of a follower. He has his own ideas of where they are going, how to get there, and who Jesus is and his own place in the group that follows Jesus.

And there is that story in Luke's account of the last supper where Jesus tries to warn Peter of his coming downfall and failure and tells him that he is praying for him, but Peter is quick to place himself in a better light, proclaiming his stalwart loyalty to Jesus. He doesn't listen well to Jesus's words.

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." (Luke 22:31–34)

It is all to no avail. Jesus even calls him Simon, his name before he met him and that doesn't register with him either. And that night when Jesus is being interrogated at the high priest's house, Peter follows him, "but at a distance." The story is devastating. Peter's failure, his cowardice, his fear, and his denials mark him forever. His moment of testing, his a chance to witness to belonging to

Jesus's disciples, to call him friend and to defend him even for a moment to some anonymous strangers, becomes his downfall.

When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl seeing him in the fire-light, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him," but he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:55–62)

Not a flattering portrait of Peter, named as a public disciple, in the company of Jesus and publicly disavowing any connection. It starts with his keeping his distance. And then he tries to be anonymous, blend into the crowd, waiting around to see what happens to Jesus. Then, when first questioned, he replies bluntly with the first level of denial: I do not know him. Disassociation. The second denial is in anger: I am not! I am not a disciple. I am not with anyone connected to him. He puts more distance between himself and Jesus. And the third denial, which is translated here as "I do not know what you are talking about!" is more often translated as curses, separating himself, severing any thin tie at all, even that of fellow countryman. And then this small scene is zeroed in on when Jesus is led out and he overhears that last vehement denial and curse and Peter looks up to see Jesus looking at him. No words needed. The deed is done, the course shifts; Jesus is taken away and Peter goes out and weeps bitterly.

That is the last we hear of Peter. He disappears from the rest of the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus—all accounts. What did that look say to Peter? What did Peter's words and angry heart do to Jesus's heart? Sebastian Moore, in his book *The Crucified Is No Stranger*, writes, "You prefer not to face the full situation, which is that you have hurt another person by shrinking yourself. When you hurt another person, your true self, the lover in you, goes into hiding, and uses every possible ruse to stay in hiding." Peter will live with his guilt, his remorse, regret, his self-pity and -loathing, and the other disciples will scatter, knowing not even Peter would stand up for Jesus. Perhaps others who heard about Jesus's death would have relayed some of Jesus's cries in agony on the cross, one of the most startling being, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Peter is publicly no longer a disciple.

And that is the reason for all this background and for this story in John. Peter in actuality went on to become the leader of the community, of the church until he died in 60 A.D., and the church struggled with this leader who had so forcibly denied any association with their Crucified Lord and Master. In Mark's Gospel (written in the 60s) Peter is mentioned in the Resurrection account, when the young man in the tomb tells the women, "go tell his disciples and Peter" (Mark 16:7). There is nothing in Matthew, except there is another Simon, of Cyrene, the disciple who carries Jesus's cross and follows him to Calvary (Matt. 27:32). And in Luke, when the two disciples return from Emmaus, they are greeted by the eleven and their companions, gathered together, who cry out, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" (Luke 24:34), but there is no account of that appearance.

How did someone so without honor, cowardly and a public sinner, become the shepherd who led the church for the thirty years after the death of Jesus? And it seems that the church struggled with that fact from the day of the Resurrection right up until this account was added to John's Gospel, probably as late as 110 A.D. It was most likely written after even the death of John, because the text intimates as much, after it describes Peter's own execution as a martyr and witness to Jesus.

These stories begin again on the Sea of Galilee and almost rewrite Simon Peter's story in light of the Resurrection and what that meant for him, for the other disciples and the church and, consequently what it means for us today. These texts are the fruit of seventy or more years of experiencing the power of the Spirit to forgive and hold bound and the practical and difficult reality of putting that into practice personally and publicly.

This is the scene depicted on the cover of this book. The title of the painting is *Easter Breakfast*, and Jesus is sitting on the beach looking straight out at us, his face and eyes filled with unbearable sadness and inexpressible peace. You can see farther off, on the sea of Galilee, the boat and the disciples fishing. It is the moment when Jesus is looking both at them, their pasts, presents, and futures, and beyond and through history right up to the present moment, when he is looking straight at us. It is a look that questions us ultimately, truth-telling us to our depths, and knowing us completely. In a sense these two lines from Sebastian Moore, in his work *God Is A New Language*, sums up Peter's story and all our stories gathered in this moment of being seen, of God looking at us: "Human living as it is normally pursued is an escape from reality. The gospel message is a recall to reality, revealed as the mystery of forgiveness." This is the story of bringing Peter back as a disciple, connecting him again to the disciples, and back home to dwelling with Jesus. Listen to the homecoming.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were

Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. (John 21:1–3)

Some things don't change. All night fishing and nothing to show for it. Peter has gone back to his former profession and hasn't improved much with the hiatus. And the others follow him backward. This section lists seven of the disciples, naming them as they are described in earlier chapters, namely the first and the last chapters of John. The scene has the feel of discouragement, lethargy, filling up time, reverting to old ways—almost as though they haven't integrated much of the appearances of the Resurrection. Now the story shifts to the beach.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. (John 21:4–8)

Only a hundred yards offshore and they're still not good at seeing. As in the account on the road to Emmaus, they can't recognize the Risen Jesus. It eludes them, perhaps as the earlier story in John asserts, because their past and present way of relating to Jesus and one another are clouding their vision. And the figure on the beach questions them, calling them children. And with echoes of the other stories and all the other times that he directed them where to go, what to do, how to catch fish, and showed them how to catch people, he commands them again.

Now it is the beloved disciple who sees and cries out to Peter, "It is the Lord!"—the announcement, the Easter proclamation—and Peter listens to and hears the other disciple's words, trusting his eyes and heart, though he can't see for himself. And Peter reacts strangely. He dressed for fishing—that is, with nothing on. And then he goes into the water, but not until he puts his clothes on! This is baptism! And Peter now wears a baptismal garment as he draws near to Jesus on the beach. He has heard Jesus's words, and he and the others have obeyed, and he has come to see and believe through the sight and belief of the beloved disciple, and he plunges into the waters of life and sight. He has forgotten all about the fish and is intent once again on getting to Jesus. The oth-

ers haul in the net, fishermen still, and not wanting to waste the catch that Jesus gave them so graciously.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of them dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:9–14)

Jesus is waiting for them and has breakfast on the beach all prepared, good fish, bread, and his company, and now he waits on them, feeding them. This is Eucharist and forgiveness. It's a done deal; it's a given. His very presence is forgiveness, acceptance, a welcoming back, and peace and communion shared among them all. Jesus feeds them the bread and the fish, food of friendship. But it must have been an awkward meal, quiet, with none of them asking any questions or saying much of anything. Jesus is doing the cooking, and Jesus is doing the talking, moving among them as a servant, just as he once washed their feet. He calls them children, his Father's children, not his brothers. They are all the beloved children of God again, in baptism, Eucharist, and forgiveness.

Jesus tells them to bring some fish, and it is Peter who now moves, going back to the boat to grab hold of the net and pull it closer and get the fish to eat. This is Peter the fisherman obeying his master, and we are told two things: no matter how many fish there are, the net is not torn and that there are 153 fish—big ones. Some fishing story! People who research such biblical trivia say that this was the known number of species of fish at the time of Jesus—this is a universal catch of all the nations and folk in the world! And this is the bark of Peter, and the nets hold secure.

But this story isn't about fishing; it's about facing reality and shepherding. The story isn't about mission or the great catch; it's about breakfast on the beach and the great catch of Jesus, who has just caught some big ones himself, seven of his wandering sheep. This story isn't about these seven, even about Peter and John; it's about us. And this story isn't about fishing; it's about forgiveness. This is the Good News. This is the essence of who Jesus is—the forgiveness of God extended to us, always, everywhere, for everything, again and again, no matter what we do or don't do. This is the first step, forgiveness, and for almost a century, Eucharist was the way sins were forgiven after baptism. The community would fast, do penance, give alms to the poor, and go

to Eucharist to be fed the bread of peace and communion, making them whole and one again.

But now it's time for the second step: reconciliation. The word in Greek literally means "to walk together again." It's time for Jesus and Peter to go for a walk on the beach together and draw Peter back into intimacy with Jesus. It is part of the public ritual that must be attended to and witnessed by the other members that knew him as designated leader and despaired when he failed publicly. This is the second gift of the gospel—to pull the community back together again so that it can walk the way of the cross all the way to Easter's glory as one body in Christ. It's a harder gift and a richer and truer, more complete one than forgiveness even!

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 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." [He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.] After this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:15–19)

Oh, the love and the pain, and how hard it is to look at who we are, what we have done, and its effect on others. How do we undo things? How do we live with what we have done to others? How do we live with failure that reveals us as so much less than we make ourselves out to be before others? How do we reconcile ourselves with Truth? This is how it's done. This is reconciliation, the second stage and gift of forgiveness that makes forgiveness mutual, with acceptance and confession, and it's a process, a walk back, a coming together, a coming home to ourselves.

The first step is acknowledgment: basically, we are flawed. And Jesus does this by calling Peter by his given name before he met him, when he had another primary relationship, Simon son of John, and he will stay with that form of address until Peter turns again and again back to facing Jesus and acknowledging what he is and what he has done and the effects his actions have had on others—those who are witnesses to this ritual confrontation in the essential meaning of that word, "face to face with one another."

Then comes confession: three times Jesus asks the question, do you love me? to offset the three times that Peter denied any relationship or friendship with, any love for him. It has to be worded so. It is direct, honest, and explicit, although even on the third asking, Peter does not seem to be getting it. The text says that Peter was hurt and that it could be that he still doesn't know how much he tore the heart of his master and friend or that he is now beginning to see and sense what he has done, and it hurts—he shares Jesus's pain at the rending of friendship and how hard it is to mend that relationship. Jesus is so kind to Peter; instead of reminding him over and over again of his fear, cowardice, curses, and distancing from him, he asks him to tell him that he loves him. Amazing courtesy, kindness, careful regard for the one who sinned by the one who was sinned against; this is the grace and art of forgiveness that are to mark and characterize all the followers of Jesus.

The third step is restitution, righting the wrong, apologizing directly, reconstituting reality with the Spirit and grace. The traditional word for this is "penance." And Peter is given three penances, one for each of his denials. The penances come in the forms of exhortations, calls to change patterns in Peter's life. They are worded in theological language: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep. We shift now from fishing to shepherding, because that is what Peter became, the shepherd of the church. And he will spend the remainder of his life doing penance, not only for his personal failure, but for the demoralizing consequences it had on the community, scattering them, sheep without a shepherd. That is never to happen again. And this is the way it is remedied.

Feed my lambs. We start with the young ones, those most damaged by what Peter did, and so the first penance is to tell the story, in every generation, to confess the sins of those who are leaders and keep telling as well of the incredible mercy of our forgiving God. This is the Good News made personal and communal to each church. Tend my sheep is next. Peter was the lost sheep, and Jesus went out after him, and now that is Peter's penance, to seek out the lost, to find and carry them home, to keep them all together and to make sure that they have fresh water, pastures, peace, and strong presence. He is to spend his time, searching out the ditches, leaving the ninety-nine if necessary to go after the one that needs finding the most. This is to be Peter's new way of life, his vocation. And lastly, feed my sheep. Peter is to lead the community and keep them together, emphasizing the expression of forgiveness, mercy, and love of God for us and in return our forgiveness and mercy and love for one another. Is there anything worse that what Peter did? All must be forgiven and all must be held bound, responsible for what we do or do not do, and we must be publicly held accountable for our effect on the community around us. That is what leadership is for—the accounting of those with power over others and influence

and the extension of mercy to all, especially those most in need of it, as an example to the community of believers and to the world. This is the preaching and the living out of the gospel. This is not a one-time response to sin, but an active commitment not to sin, to resist the evil and injustices we have committed before, and not to return to our old ways, alone or with others. Like the asking of the question, do you love me? over and over again, and the command to feed and tend and feed the sheep, over and over again, we are to be known as those who forgive and forgive and forgive, over and over and over again. It is the refrain, the music of our lives.

But there is a third gift that accompanies forgiveness and reconciliation—it is atonement. The word can be broken up to read “at-one-ment.” It is the way we bring all the community back together again, with one heart, one mind, one body in Christ. It is the hard work of undoing, redeeming what was done, sharing in the pain of what tore things and people apart. For Peter it is Jesus’ words about his dying, his finally giving glory to God, and staying true in the face of persecution and suffering, facing the cross he once turned and ran away from. But Peter’s atoning reveals again how unworthy he still is to die the way his beloved Lord died—he’ll be led to crucifixion, but he will be crucified upside down, paradoxically righting the wrong and righting his piece of the world that he bent out of shape with his sin and unfaithfulness.

In the early church, this forgiveness, reconciliation, and atonement that became the sacrament of reconciliation were aptly named second baptism. It was a starting over, a new beginning, and when it was first practiced, it was only for three major sins that ate at the foundation of the whole church, where the communities were small, intimate, and what anyone did had tremendous influence for good or evil on all the members. It was enacted, as a long process, sometimes years in the making, for the sins of murder, giving up one’s faith in public, and breaking one’s marriage vows, when married as a Christian. And it was only done once in a lifetime, publicly celebrated in the liturgical seasons of the church, when the sinner, the penitent, was enrolled in the Order of Penitents. These sinners were welcomed back into the church when the community decided that they had changed, done restitution, penance, and atoned for the evil they had subjected the church to by their behaviors, or words, or failures. On Holy Thursday, they were drawn back into the net, for Eucharist before the Paschal mystery of the Body of Christ was lived through once again, and the catechumens became new Christians, born in the tomb and waters of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This add-on ending of John’s gospel is at its heart a story of mercy unbounded, of God’s teaching us how to follow Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection after betrayal, after sin, and after missing once again the depth we are called to as the servants, the followers, and the friends of God in Jesus. We have

known such mercy ourselves that we are schooled in it and are sent forth to bring the Good News to the torn heart of the world, practicing it publicly as witnesses and resisting evil with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength. We are to make the world and its inhabitants whole again, holy, redeeming every situation and bringing mercy’s presence among those who are most in need of it. This is what we are initiated into at our baptisms, this is the practice of resurrection life, and we are fed the Body of the Risen Lord in community for the strength and courage to practice this and resist falling back into the dominant powers of the world. We preach mercy in forgiveness, reconciliation, restitution-penance, atonement, and always the peace of Christ. This is our calling, vocation, mission, and honor. And Jesus’s last words to Peter are the first ones: follow me, follow me all the way to the cross and resurrection.

But this is John’s gospel, and though it was crucial to draw Peter back into the net of Jesus, establishing him as the shepherd of the church and providing a model for daily practice of forgiveness and the Good News, the last word, the final story is about the Beloved Disciple, who has no actual authority in the church, but whose love is stronger than anything institutional, ordained, traditional, or learned. It ends with a moment of intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple.

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:20–23)

Always this disciple follows after Jesus, never letting him out of his sight, and Peter is curious about him, about this other disciple’s relationship in life and death to Jesus. But he is not given entrance into that relationship; he is exhorted instead to look to himself and begin once again with passion and intensity to “follow only Jesus.” The language is steeped in Johannine theology. Jesus’s words at the core of the gospel are, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26). What if the Beloved Disciple remains until Jesus comes—remains faithful, remains truthful, remains loving, remains near to the cross, remains believing and seeing? This is the image of the Community of the Beloved Disciples, who all remain true to life, resurrection life, and their baptism vows—this is the essence

of what it means to be a beloved disciple. We are called to love, love unto death, willing to die daily so that others' faith might be strengthened. This is the focus and intent of John's gospel—to make beloved disciples. This is mirrored in the understanding of the early church. Listen to this, in the writings of Clement of Alexandria.

If martyrdom consists in confessing God, then every person who conducts himself in purity in the knowledge of God and who obeys his commandments is a martyr in his life and in his words: for in whatever way his soul is separated from his body, he will pour out his faith like blood, both during his life and at the moment of his death. This is what the Lord says in the Gospel: "Whoever leaves his father, his mother, his brothers, his wife, or his lands, because of the Gospel and my name," such a man is blessed because he has realized in himself not only an ordinary martyrdom, but the true knowledge of martyrdom, in living and acting according to the rule of the Gospel, out of love of the Lord. For the true knowledge is to know the Name and to understand the Gospel. (*Prayers of the Martyrs*, p. 11)

For John there is no dying, only living in the death and resurrection of Jesus, remaining close to the heart of the Beloved Disciple and following as closely as you can in the Crucified and Risen Lord's shadow. The journey, the walk with Jesus is always deeper and deeper in, being seen more and more truly and responding in love. This other disciple now ends this last story and draws the gospel to a close.

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:24–25)

The other disciple is wise, leaving the gospel open-ended. There are so many stories to tell that the world couldn't contain the books, because Jesus is alive, in the world, and the story is still being told, and all believers are called to give testimony that is true, with their own lives and words. The world cannot contain the Risen Lord, just as the tomb could not hold his body in death, and the world cannot contain that presence and power loose among his beloved disciples either. Persecution, exile, death, martyrdom, sin, evil, injustice, torture, betrayal, dissension in the community, failure to practice resurrection here will not stand against the Crucified and Risen One walking the world, going after his wandering disciples and friends, asking them over and over again, "Do you love me? Do you?" and reminding us again and again that God is peace, and we are to become God's living, breathing, merciful, and forgiving

peace in the world and let loose the power of the Resurrection now. "Follow me! Through life, into death and the tomb, and out again, standing in resurrection light, more alive than you have ever been." And we all do that by feeding the lambs, tending and feeding the sheep, loving them as we would love the Risen Lord—it is the only way we love the Risen Lord. And the world needs to see us walking together again with the Risen Lord.

There is a short, marvelous Japanese poem to help us remember how we are to live.

I fall down
I get up
I fall down
All the while I keep dancing.

This is the dance of resurrection, of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of restitution, of atonement, of love. "Come, children, eat your meal. Come follow me." This is the Gospel of the Lord. Amen.