

Here's My Heart  
John 21:9–19  
Sunday, April 14, 2024 (Easter 3)

In 1991 a 19-year-old man named Shaka Senghor shot a man four times and killed him. He didn't start off as a bad guy. He grew up in Detroit as an honor roll student who dreamed of becoming a doctor. But then his parents divorced, and his mother began abusing him. His childhood friend was murdered. He was robbed at gunpoint. When he was 13, he ran away from home to escape the abuse, and he ended up selling drugs. And then when he was 17, he was shot multiple times. All of these things traumatized him to the point that, when he was 19, a car pulled up outside his house, an argument ensued, he turned to walk away, but then he thought he heard a car door open, and he instinctively turned around and fired four shots. He was charged with second degree murder and spent the next 19 years of his life in prison, *seven* of them in solitary confinement.

But one day he got a letter in the mail from a relative of the man he killed. And in that letter, this woman told him that she forgave him, because she realized that he had experienced abuse and trauma that had led him to that point. He said it was the first time in his life that he had felt open to forgiving *himself*. He began reading, writing, learning. In 2010 he was released from prison after 19 years and went on to become a *New York Times* bestselling author who teaches at universities and advocates for criminal justice reform. He has founded initiatives to mentor at-risk youth and help people affected by violence and incarceration. He was completely transformed by that forgiveness and says he wants to spend the rest of his life helping people learn about the power of forgiveness, the power of redemption, and second chances.

Has anyone ever given you a second chance? Maybe it's not for something like Shaka Senghor did, but have you ever made a mistake or done something that hurt someone and been forgiven; been given a chance to make up for it and make things right?

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For the past two months, we have been following the story of Peter from being a fisherman to being called by Jesus to fish *for* people. We've seen him walk on water...and sink. We've seen him proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God...and then rebuke him and be rebuked *by* him. We've seen Jesus call him the *rock* on which he will build his church...and we've seen Jesus call him *Satan*. We've seen him draw a sword to fight for Jesus...and then deny that he even knows him. We have seen him run from the cross in fear...and run to the empty tomb in hope.

And now, at the end of this series, we find Peter right back where he started – fishing. We heard last week how he was out on a boat fishing with the other disciples, but they hadn't caught anything all night, until Jesus tells them to cast their net on the *other* side of the boat, and they catch so many fish they can barely haul them in. Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to Jesus, and it says that when they get to the shore, Jesus is there with bread and fish cooking over a charcoal fire.

*A charcoal fire.* Like the one Peter stood warming himself by in the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus was on trial. The one he was standing by when he denied knowing Jesus three times. The one he stood by and wept when he realized what he had done. Jesus is preparing a meal over the scene of Peter's greatest failure. You think things were a little tense at that breakfast? The air was a little heavy?

John doesn't tell us that any words were spoken while they ate. But when they had finished, Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Most of the time we focus on the question that Jesus asks him. But let's start with how he asks it. Jesus doesn't call him *Peter*. He calls him by his original, pre-disciple name, *Simon, son of John*. When he first meets Jesus back in chapter 1, the very first thing Jesus says to him is, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called *Cephas, Peter*." Ever since then, Jesus has only called him *Peter*. Until this moment, when he calls him *Simon* again. Almost like he's starting over and calling Peter all over again.

*Do you love me more than these?* We don't know exactly what *these* refers to. Jesus could be saying, "Do you love me more than bread and fish and fire, the things of this world?" It could be, "Do you love me more than you love these other people?" It could be, "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?" It could be, "Do you love me more than these three denials that hang over this fire?" It could be *all* of it. Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

Again, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Again, Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

A third time, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And Peter felt hurt. It doesn't say exactly *why* Peter felt hurt. It could be because Jesus questioned his love for him three times. Didn't he believe him the first two? It could be because Peter realizes exactly what Jesus is doing. Peter says, "Lord, you know everything." *Everything. You know how I denied you three times around this very fire, even though you weren't there to hear it.* "You know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Three denials around a charcoal fire, met by three chances to profess his love. And it ends with Jesus saying, “Follow me.” Just like he did three years earlier, when he first called Peter. Jesus is going back to the beginning. He is wiping the slate clean. He is calling Peter to follow him again. He is giving Peter the chance to start over. A second chance.

But it’s easy to *say* that you love someone. Peter has done that plenty of times. Jesus wants him to *show* that he loves him. He wants him to *prove* it. And the way that he *does* that, Jesus says, is by taking care of the people that belong to Jesus. Feeding people as *he* has been fed. Teaching people as *he* has been taught. Forgiving people as *he* has been forgiven. And like Shaka Senghor, Peter is going to spend the rest of his life doing that; trying to make up for what he has done wrong; trying to make the most of his second chance.

What this story shows us is that God is a God of second chances. Jesus died, and now he is alive again. Peter denied, and now he is restored. And God gives those second chances to *us*, too. After our failures and mistakes and sin, after the ways we hurt others, the ways we have *been* hurt, after all the ways we fall short of what God wants for us, no matter what we have done or what has been done *to* us, God *loves* us and *forgives* us and gives us another chance. And another. And another. As many as it takes.

What was it that Jesus told Peter? “Forgive seventy-seven times,” or, “seventy *times* seven.” Would Jesus call *us* to do something that he was not willing to do himself? He’s already done it. In his death on a cross is all the forgiveness we will ever need for the rest of our lives. We did nothing to earn it or deserve it; it’s not because we were good enough or faithful enough. But we *are* called to spend the rest of our lives making the most of the second chance that we have been

given. We are called to prove our love for Jesus from this point forward. And the way that Jesus calls us to *do* that is by *sharing* what we have been given with others. Teaching people as we have been taught. Feeding people as we have been fed. Forgiving people as we have been forgiven. Extending second chances to others. Taking care of the people that belong to Jesus. And who belongs to Jesus? *Everyone*.

Jesus asks *us*, “Do you love me,” and the way we *show* our love for Jesus is by loving *others*. *All* others, no matter who they are or whether we think they are worthy or deserving of it. It may take you places you do not wish to go. That’s what Jesus told Peter. It may feel like it is *killing* you. Jesus felt that, too. But as follower of Jesus, we cannot *receive* forgiveness and then refuse to forgive others. We cannot *receive* a second chance and then refuse to give a second chance to others. We cannot *receive* Jesus’ love and profess to love Jesus in return and then refuse to love others.

All of this might *sound* good, in theory. But take a moment to think about what it *means* for you. Who is the person in your life that Jesus is calling you to love, to forgive, to give a second chance? Can you do it? Yes, you can, with God’s help. You can do *all things* through Christ who strengthens you.

You might stumble and fall short and fail over and over again, because it’s not easy. But the good news is that we can keep going back to the cross for the forgiveness that we need, over and over again. Because God is a God of second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seven times seven chances. As many as it takes.

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Throughout this series looking at Peter, we have also been looking at the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” And each week, a line from that song embodies our theme for the day. Today that line is, “Here’s my heart.” It’s the culmination of the song; everything builds up to that verse. “O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be! Let that grace now, like a fether, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here’s my heart; O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above.”

It’s interesting that when Peter *answers* Jesus’ question, “Do you love me,” he doesn’t just say, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” Each time, he says, “Yes, Lord; *you know* that I love you.” He can’t say, “Yes, Lord; I have *proven* that I love you,” because he *hasn’t*. He is prone to wander, and he *has* left the God he loves. But the good news in that answer, for Peter and for us, is that Jesus knows we love him, even when we fail to show it. Jesus knows our hearts and is simply calling us to *show* what is in our hearts. We may try and fail. But we can’t ever stop trying.

Being a disciple of Jesus is about giving our hearts to him, over and over again, day after day, as many times as it takes, trusting that Jesus never gives up on us, he never leaves us alone when we fail, but is out in front of us, constantly calling to us, “Try again. Take another step. Follow me.”