

A man named Greg Carey told a story about his uncle Norman, that I want to share with you.

You might wonder why I am telling you about uncle Norman, but if you listen closely, you'll realize that we all know an uncle Norman, whether it's ourselves, or someone we love.

This is how Greg tells the story.

*"My Uncle Norman fought in Europe during World War II.*

*[He was] an artillery observer, [so] he didn't return with many "heroic" stories to tell.*

*When I was little, he would roll out some souvenirs from the war, and I'd be impressed:*

*German military dress knives and lovely table linens.*

*I don't recall all of the stories or how these things became his...*

*His war experience was hardly glamorous....*

*When Uncle Normal was much older, he came close to death after gall bladder surgery.*

*That night he experienced profound nightmares, the Lady Macbeth experience of bloody hands he could not cleanse.*

*The next day, he told me a very different story than the ones I'd heard before.*

*I believe I was the first to hear of the time when he called in the coordinates for an intersection across which a significant body of Germans was crossing.*

*For 30 minutes, he said, he watched the effects of the barrage he had targeted.*

*And now, 40 years later, his hands wouldn't come clean."*

(John 21:1-19: Repairing Our Grief," HuffpostReligion.com.)

This story is an example of 'moral injury,' which is an injury to one's conscience because we've done something, which violates our moral code or our ethics and then creates profound emotional shame that we have to live with.

Now, maybe we haven't all fought in wars and maybe we don't carry around the kind of trauma that uncle Norman had to bear, but we all have some kind of moral injury.

It lives in that section of memories, tucked back in our minds.

It might be full of many memories of small things that we've done or said that we wish we could take back.

Or maybe it's just one big thing that haunts you at inopportune moments.

When we think about these experiences, they bring back pain and overwhelming feelings of guilt and regret.

We aren't perfect, and we've all said and done things in the heat of the moment that we thought we'd never do.

This can be especially painful when the only person who can absolve us of our guilt or offer us repentance, isn't with us anymore.

Maybe there's that one person you wish you could say, "I'm sorry," to, one more time, or the person you wish you could tell that you didn't mean what you did or said, but they aren't with us, and that chance is no more.

Many of us live with this seemingly incurable pain.

I have spent time with many families right after they've lost a loved one, and this is when these feelings of pain and regret can be the strongest.

Sentences start with, "I wish I would have..." or

"If only she knew..."

There are different ways of living with this pain, but what I have observed is that many families find a sense of peace in doing routine things.

They keep themselves busy with groceries or cleaning or cooking or putzing in the garage or going to their favorite beach or restaurant, to keep their mind off of their loved one.

I wonder if this isn't what the disciples were doing in today's story.

They went fishing.

They had just lost their beloved friend and teacher.

They were presumably traumatized and grief-stricken, and so they try fishing.

Remember that many of them were fishermen before Jesus called them as his disciples.

While we are trying to keep ourselves busy with “normal” things, ironically, it’s often these mundane tasks that bring back memories of our loved one.

We see what they used to order on the menu, we drive by the bench we used to sit on, and the person, the sadness, maybe even the guilt comes back to us in our efforts to create a sense of normalcy.

I am sure that while they were sitting in that boat, the disciples had to have been thinking about Jesus.

We know they weren’t catching any fish, and if you’ve ever been fishing on a day when they’re not biting, you know that there’s not much to do but sit around and think.

*“Their recent failures had to be still fresh wounds.*

*Peter was probably replaying the scene- his three denials- over and over again.*

*Each “I do not know this man” stabbing him again and again.*

*How could he deny his friend?*

*“I never knew him” looping over and over and over again.*

*The other disciples, sitting in the boat with Peter, were reflecting on their own failure to stand strong.*

*In the garden, those last, precious moments with Jesus, they spent asleep.*

*Asleep.*

*They failed the last request Jesus made of them, and when everything fell to pieces in the darkness of the garden, when they watched as one of their own number betrayed Jesus with a friend's kiss, they ran.*

*They all ran.*

*The sound of their footsteps and heavy breathing haunting their hearts.*

*Here they were, sitting in a boat, fishing, dropping that net in the water the same way they had countless times before... before Jesus called them into a life of another kind.*

*That call must have felt like a lifetime ago.*

*One had to wonder if they sat there silently.*

*Listening to the lapping of the water against the side of the boat.*

*The flapping of the sails.*

*The cries of the seagulls.*

*Wondering if the pain would ever subside.*

*They failed him.*

*How could they have failed him?*

*After all he'd done for them.*

*Jesus had healed Peter's mother-in-law.*

*Jesus had entrusted his own Mother to the care of John.*

*He was as much a part of their family as any blood relative."*

(Rev. Michael Palmer, "John 21:1-19," [www.aplainaccount.org](http://www.aplainaccount.org))

And you wonder if Peter wasn't suffering the most because of the way he acts after they notice Jesus on the shore.

The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish to the shore.

But Peter, when he heard that Jesus was on the shore, *"he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea"* (John 21: 7).

Many people do irrational things when we're in the grips of grief, we're not thinking straight.

This happens to Peter, because he sort of lost it, and it seems that Jesus must have picked up on this.

Because after they are done with breakfast, he talks to Peter.

I can imagine that he pulled him aside, away from the group, to ask him a question 3 times.

The first question he asks Peter is, *“Do you love me more than these?”* (John 19:16)

And then the second and third time, he asks Peter, whom he calls Simon son of John, *“Do you love me?”* (John 19: 17)

The first two times, Peter responds, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* (John 19: 15-16)

Then the third time, perhaps frustrated or hurt and wondering if Jesus believed him the first two times, he speaks a little more firmly saying, *“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”*  
(John 19: 17)

Now remember that when Peter betrayed Jesus 3 times, he was sitting in front of a fire in a courtyard in Jerusalem, and this time, when Jesus offers him 3 chances to say that he loves him, they are sitting in front of a fire again.

Jesus has given Peter a profound gift.

It's like he's said, “its okay.”

Not only do I forgive you, and you can forgive yourself.

But, Jesus being Jesus, he doesn't stop there.

He takes it one step further, saying, “I forgive you,” and I also need you.

He invites Peter to participate in the formation of disciples by saying, “feed my sheep.”

He's telling Peter that he trusts him, he believes in him.

He's drawn back into the community and given meaningful work to do.

Jesus has confronted Peter with his own moral injury of the past.

Through ritually recreating that scene, the fire, the 3 questions, Jesus walks side-by-side with Peter through his pain and regret and ushers him into a new future.

Peter now has work to do; he has to tend the flock.

Somehow through this beautiful interaction and commission, healing begins and new life bursts forth for Peter on that shoreline.

Now, for those of us who suffer from moral injury, we don't all have the opportunity to sit down with an embodiment of our deceased loved one, so they can tell us that everything will be all right.

But there's an important connection between this scene and us.

At each of our Baptisms, we are commissioned to share in the work and ministry of Jesus, we are called to tend to the flock, and just like Peter, we often fall short.

We screw up, we say and do what we shouldn't say or do, painful memories are created, and our burden gets heavier.

We might find ourselves less and less worthy of doing God's work.



We become convinced that we aren't good enough.

But Jesus forgives us, and in doing this he gives us permission to release our grip on the painful memories and our need to talk to our loved one, one last time.

He also tells us, "it's okay."

And then he calls us to try again because there are still sheep to be fed, people to be loved.

Jesus is saying, "I need you because you have something to offer the world, you have meaningful work to do because there's a hole in the world and it's in the shape of you and you are needed to bring love and light and understanding to all the networks you intersect with."

The truth is that we aren't serving anyone by punishing ourselves, by becoming incapacitated with guilt and regret.

We know this in our heads, it's easy to intellectually understand it, but believing it with our hearts and living into it is so much more difficult.

It can be hard to accept that we are worthy and we are needed just as we are, but that is the truth.

You are needed to go and proclaim the Good News that we are loved and that God releases us from our moral injury.

I'm sure that there's someone in your life who needs to hear these liberating words from you.

I hope and pray that if there's anything on your back that's weighing you down, causing you to stumble, or preventing you from serving the world in Jesus' name,

that one day you are liberated from your moral injury.

That one day you are able to truly believe that you are loved, you are worthy, you are forgiven, and you are needed.

Amen.

Rev. Wells- UCC Burlington