

These days, Danny Cox goes into a prison to serve as a chaplain and help inmates.

But it wasn't too long that he was an inmate himself, as his life spiraled out of control.

After serving 10 years, he stepped out of the federal prison in South Dakota after a decade behind bars and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd served his time. But he wasn't just free. He was a new man. Honestly, Danny says he doubted anyone who knew him before would recognize him. He hardly recognized himself.

His home life hadn't been great growing up. His dad died in a car accident when he was just 10. He'd been abusive and violent. An alcoholic. When Danny was 16, his mother remarried. Another alcoholic. His stepfather handed him his first beer at 18. "Drink up," he said. "You're a man now." So, Danny did. He drank and drank. Soon he was drinking like his old man.

In college, he got into drugs. Smoking pot at first, then popping pills and dropping acid. After two years, he dropped out and opened a successful

neighborhood tavern. By then, cocaine was his drug of choice. He made good money but not enough to support his addiction. And so, Danny started selling drugs on the side. He told himself he was able to balance it all.

That illusion shattered the first time he smoked crack cocaine. It was the most intense high he'd ever felt. He couldn't get enough. He was awake for days at a time, wired. He spent \$2,000 a week chasing that ever-elusive high. He had to sell more and more drugs to pay for it. He started missing work. He was a mess. Still, he didn't see what was coming.

On April 10, 1991, Danny left work for the day. DEA agents surrounded him in the parking lot. They handcuffed him, read him his rights. At that point, he knew it was over. He was 42 and facing up to 20 years in federal prison for drug trafficking.

Sitting in the county jail, awaiting trial, Danny was filled with rage. He blamed everyone but himself. Others in his position might have considered it rock bottom. A pivotal moment to change and do better. But not him.

Even after he'd been through the worst of his withdrawal symptoms, all he could think about, all he cared to think about, was chasing his next high.

One day, about a week after his arrest, a guard called his name. "Cox? I've got a letter for you."

A letter? Danny thought. Who would be sending him a letter? Especially now? He wasn't in touch with his family, and his lawyer would have come to see him in person.

As soon as he touched the envelope, he felt a tingle go up his arm. Warm like a bolt of electricity but not painful. It buzzed pleasantly, just below the surface of his skin. Strangely, tears welled up in his eyes.

Danny looked at the return address. He recognized the name. It was from a woman he knew, though she was more of an acquaintance than a friend. What could she possibly have to say to me, Danny wondered? With his hands shaking slightly, he tore the envelope open.

The letter was short. “Danny,” the first line read, “No matter what you’ve done, God still loves you.”

At that point in his life, Danny says he would’ve scoffed at those words. He hadn’t grown up religious. He felt he didn’t need God to feel whole. But for some inexplicable reason, a tidal wave of emotion washed over him. As if reading those words had sent him through a portal into another world, a world that promised something greater. The sounds of the jail—echoing voices and clanging metal doors—faded. He felt as if he’d been pulled out of his body. He was somewhere else, floating. He was with God. Warmth flooded his soul. Such tremendous love overwhelmed him. He could barely breathe.

Then, as if projected in front of him, images flickered to life. Is that...me, he wondered? He watched scenes play out before his eyes, a highlight reel of occasions when he had hurt people by using and selling drugs. The things he’d done and said—such awful things, one after another. Guilt rose up within me.

Jesus, he thought, can you ever forgive me?

Then he was back in his body. Danny's heart pounded. The jail cell around him looked the same, but it felt different. He was different. He had experienced God's love and mercy. It felt as if, spiritually, he'd been given a second chance. It was something that up until then, he didn't know he needed.

Danny pled guilty. The judge sentenced me to 10 years in federal prison. He'd lost everything, but he'd never felt better. God's forgiveness hadn't erased his past but revealed a path forward. The relentless compulsion to get high was gone. For the first time in years, it wasn't the first thing and last thing he thought about every day. He used his free time for Bible study and reflection. The kind of quiet introspection he'd avoided all his life. Prison tested him—emotionally, physically, spiritually. But by the time he walked out as a free man, he was ready to enter society again.

He wasn't worried about relapsing. Besides, he'd lost contact with everyone from his old life. he'd have to start over—but that in itself was a blessing.

I won't be coming back here, Danny promised himself as he walked away from the prison gates. Not ever!

Looking back now, he can appreciate the irony.

Upon release, Danny worked on rebuilding his relationship with his family. He went to church every Sunday and was soon asked to serve as a deacon. A few years later, God spoke to him again.

Danny was driving home from work when he heard it clearly. Not an audible voice but one in his spirit.

You went to prison for doing bad, it said. Now I'm going to send you back to do good. But this time, you're going through the front door with honor.

He knew exactly what it meant.

That was 17 years ago. Ever since, Danny has worked as a prison chaplain. He says he can't think of anyone better suited for the job. After

all, he understands these men, having been one of them. And he knows the importance of that second chance.

All of us do things in our lives we aren't proud of. But like Danny, we want to recognize the love of God and respond to it, for, like Danny, we have a mission to fulfill.

In the Gospel, the disciples are fishing, and seem to be kind of taking it easy; Peter isn't even dressed. While they aren't doing anything wrong, it seems they've kind of reverted to "life as it used to be" by returning to fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps they've kind of abandoned their true vocation. Jesus now invites them to take it up again. He shares bread with them, and we can see the Eucharistic overtones there, and their eyes are opened much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus then takes Peter aside and they go on a walk. Peter is asked three times "Simeon, son of John, do you love me more than these" and is told to feed His lambs, tend His sheep, and feed his sheep. Peter gets distressed about being asked three times if he loves Jesus, but this is his second chance. Now he can undo the prior denial by looking at what he did,

acknowledging it by having to address it, and looking forward to the next part of his mission which Jesus tells him will be quite hard.

In our lives, we are on a mission too. We sometimes fail. But Jesus invites us, like Danny and like Peter, to look back, to learn from our past, and to also look ahead and keep on the journey.

First, the past. I've used the example before, but like Simba in "The Lion King" who runs away from the past, sometimes we can do the same thing. I'd imagine it wasn't pleasant for the apostles to think about how they were not there for Jesus on Good Friday. Other times in our lives, like in Danny's life, sins and struggles can just take over and be overwhelming. Upon his arrest, he wanted to blame everyone but himself. But then, he recognized that he was loved by God, but also that he had to respond to that love by owning up to what he did. For us to have true healing, we have to name our sins. It's why we go to confession; not to be shamed, but to say, out loud, the things we have done; to lay the cards on the table. So, it's worth thinking about what in my life do I maybe need to bring to God? What am I still struggling with? If there are people you've hurt, do you talk to them and talk through what happened? It's hard to say "I'm sorry" but we need to do

that with God and others for true growth. But with that too, we must acknowledge the wounds others have inflicted. Danny had a horrible childhood. And just as we look at our past at what we've done, sometimes, like I said last week, we also need to look at the impact others have had on us. Sometimes that can be quite negative, but we need to work at it to find peace.

Second, the present. How are we doing? Sometimes we think things are fine, but they aren't. Peter was a fine fisherman, but it wasn't what he was called to do. He was running from his true vocation. Danny was functioning running a bar for a time, but his life was getting way out of control. So, where are we at right now is a question we need to ask. Are we listening to God and surrendering to His will? Do we know how much God loves us and are we trusting in Him? How are we doing in terms of how we are living our our vocation as a parent or husband or wife? Hopefully, we always want to become better, but we all have room for growth too, which is why we always ask ourselves the questions about what's going right, but where we could do better.

And lastly, the mission ahead. It's not easy. Jesus says if we want to be His disciple, we take up our cross and follow Him. He implies Peter will ultimately die for his faith. But through it, He is with us always. Just as it took work for Danny not to relapse but to keep going back to the prison where he now works to help others, it takes so much work to raise kids, to be a part of a family, to carry out the vocation to which we are called. But, working with God, we can truly do so much together.

In life, it can be easy just to drift from day to day, or to lose our way. But God wasn't calling Peter to pick up his pole to catch fish. He was calling him to catch men. Often, like Peter, like Danny, we will fail along the way. But as Jesus forgave and gave Peter a second chance, and fed him with the bread and feeds us too with the Eucharist, He used Peter and the others to do amazing things - to begin the Church which is with us to this day. So what is He calling you and me to do? We are given multiple chances, so with our Lord, let us look at the past, know that we are forgiven, and discern our mission and, with our Lord, go forward. We are all wounded, but we can also be healers, healed by the grace of God, and using that grace to change the world by carrying our our mission to feed God's sheep by helping to lead them to our Lord.