

April 23, 2006
John 20:19-31
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“That You May Have Life”

Ten men and several women are scattered around a darkened room. In twos and threes, they speak in hushed tones, wary of speaking loudly enough to alert passersby to their presence, hoping that the doors will keep out any who might be looking for them. Suddenly, someone appears in their presence. He looks like their old friend Jesus. But he was killed just days ago! It couldn't be! "Peace be with you," he says. Could it be? He extends his hands, showing the wounds of his execution. It is Jesus. They rejoice together, hardly daring to believe it despite their own eyes!

Our Gospel passage today is familiar to most of us. The Lectionary places it on this second Sunday of Easter in all three years of the cycle. The passage is most recognizable for Thomas' reasonable, but pointed, skepticism and his striking confession of faith a week later...after Jesus reappears and invites him to move past his doubt to belief. While Thomas' demand for evidence has been helpful to believers for centuries, I want to focus on the experience of the ten disciples huddled in the room without Thomas, seeing and hearing the Lord for the first time since his crucifixion.

John, chapter 20, begins with the discovery of the empty tomb, then Mary Magdalene's brief encounter with the Lord, which she reports to the disciples. Then, our text picks up the narrative that evening. They're in hiding, or at least lying low after the execution of their beloved rabbi, not sure what to make of Mary's experience. The gospel writer, John, makes clear that Jesus' sudden appearance in their midst is in hiding; so Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you," was appropriate. They could've used some shalom right about then. Unbidden, Jesus then shows them his hands and side, assuring them of his identity. They sigh together with relief and rejoice, as "they saw the Lord."

Then things get interesting. Again, Jesus reassures them, "Peace be with you," adding, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Even had Jesus not shown them his hands, there would have been no mistaking him now. As Albert Winn, Presbyterian scholar and pastor, points out in John's gospel, Jesus is constantly referring to himself as "the one whom God has sent." Clearly, to the disciples, this is Jesus. But, who did they know him to be? The Jesus they have come to know, over the last three years of nearly constant contact, as their teacher, their master and their friend defined his own identity as one who was sent. In John's gospel he refers to himself that way four times but, more strikingly, he refers to God as the sender 27 times! One of those, by way of example, was in the temple, talking with a crowd about Abraham. In John 8:42 Jesus said "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own; but he sent me." According to Winn, "The sense of having been sent into the world by God lies at the very core of Jesus' self-understanding."

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." What does that mean? In order to understand how they (and we) are being sent, let me suggest three characteristics of Jesus as one who is sent. Each occurs several times throughout John's gospel; but I'll share a single text as an example of each.

First, Jesus knows the one who sent him. (John 17:25) "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me."

Second, Jesus does the will of the one who sent him, not his own. (John 6:38) "...for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me."

Third, Jesus speaks for the one who sent him. (John 12:49) "...for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak."

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." If the disciples are truly to be sent as Jesus was sent, they would know Jesus, do his will and speak with his authority. They do know him. They've spent three years eating, working, traveling and studying together. They know the one who is sending them. But can they do his will? Can they speak for Jesus? Will they do so? Probably not on their own, but in the next line in our text, Jesus fulfills a promise he's made to them. (John 20:22) "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

So here, near the end of the fourth gospel, we get the Great Commission and Pentecost all together on the evening of Easter Day. Matthew records the birth of the church with Jesus' familiar words which my wife and I often use to introduce Baptisms "...go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you..."

Luke describes the scene at the end of his gospel, too, with a similar commission; but in Luke's account they wait fifty days for the feast of Pentecost before the Spirit fans them into flames for their mission as described in the beginning of Acts.

Here in John we get the birth of the church and the spark of the Spirit kindled together in two verses, in one evening when the risen Lord appears in their midst. John's image of Jesus breathing his breath/spirit upon/into those gathered disciples is intended to remind us of God breathing life into Adam in Genesis 2. This is the beginning of the new life inspired by the Spirit of God and lived together in the community of faith. And that community has been sent as Jesus was sent.

The next verse in John's narrative specifies the nature of their commission: (John 20:23) "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This kind of authority should give us all pause. What an awesome responsibility. It is indeed the very authority our Lord exercised in his ministry. "Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Stand up and walk?'" and Jesus so offended Jewish sensibilities about who could forgive sins that, ultimately, it got him killed.

Some scholars feel that this authority is meant as a corporate responsibility-something done only as the church and it is a responsibility that came to be exercised in baptism-a sacrament of forgiveness through which one joins the church. This understanding is consistent with Matthew's account of the Great Commission I just mentioned and it is similar to Luke's version in 24:47-49, where "repentance and forgiveness is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations..."

Now there is some validity to interpreting this Easter commission as the disciples bearing news of Christ's forgiveness to the world. But, in the context of John's gospel, there is a fuller understanding of Jesus' clear instruction: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Do you remember...last week in his Easter sermon, Dr. Galloway was working with what is called "the shorter ending" of Mark's gospel - how in the earliest manuscripts of Mark, the story stops as the women run from the tomb and tell no one, for they were afraid? He called it a rough-hewn ending that the church has always been tempted to sand down, smooth over, to get rid of the splinters that poke us as we handle such a rough story. But, rather than harmonizing Mark's ending with Matthew's or Luke's, Lewis said, "Let's let Mark be Mark." 'What will God say to us if we listen carefully to Mark's gospel unrefined, unmixed, surprising and disturbing as it is?' I want to do the same thing with John's account of Jesus sending his disciples into the world. Let's let John be John. Rather than harmonizing his account with Matthew and Luke, who emphasize making disciples, baptizing, teaching and proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to the nations, let us hear how John records Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sends them.

In John's narrative, while the disciples are still taking in the enormity of what their Lord might have meant in sending them as he was sent, Jesus breathes on them saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Can Jesus really mean that? Is he speaking only to the ten, or also to the women? Will that include Thomas, too? How about you and me? Do we really have that kind of authority? Yes. These instructions are our instructions too. John clearly has future believers in mind as he recounts Jesus' final days with the disciples. As Jesus prays in the upper room in chapter 17, he says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

The lectionary text selections are designed to remind us of the context of the early church. The Acts passage highlights the close-knit nature of the earliest Christian community. The first community of believers was deeply and genuinely united; they held all things in common, no one was in need. They joyfully proclaimed Jesus' resurrection as the heart of their message. This image of the unity of the early church is helpful to keep in mind as we wrestle with the challenging issue of being given authority to forgive or not to forgive sins. But, if we are to let John be John, what is unique to the Johannine community from which John's gospel comes?

John's gospel was written after the other three gospels were already circulating among Christian communities. Evidence suggests that John's community was experiencing tension with its Jewish neighbors who did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah. The synagogues

were the very center of Jewish life in the Roman world after the fall of the temple, so for the early Christians, most of whom were Jewish, the fear of being excluded from the synagogues led them toward isolation as a community- becoming more and more insular as they set themselves apart from the society around them. But they were also experiencing tension from within.

The lectionary gives us another clue about the context for which John's gospel was written. The epistle selection for today is First John. We didn't read it this morning; but the Call to Confession and the Assurance of Pardon given today come from that epistle. In contrast to Luke's glowing description of the unity of the early church in Acts, John's letter to his community opens with a series of calls to repentance and gives us a glimpse of some of the tensions emerging within that tightly-knit (some might say "tightly-wound") community. Willingness to take personal responsibility clearly wasn't a forte.

(1 John 1:10) "If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us." Or, (1 John 2:9) "Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness."

Jesus' charge, giving responsibility for granting forgiveness, would be crucial for life within the Johannine community of faith. As people living in an insular community, the brokenness of individuals comes to grate on those around them.

My greed, your selfishness, his ego and her propensity to gossip are a recipe for hurt feelings, discord and strife in our community. In order to continue as a people of faith, seeking and granting forgiveness is an essential ingredient for our common life. It was apparently an acute problem in John's community.

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells of Rebecca, a church member, long divorced, whose husband dabbled in pornography, occasionally solicited prostitutes while out of town on business and eventually left her for another woman, Julianne. Rebecca couldn't ignore him because of the regular contact required for arranging his visitation of their children.

Unable to trust him, unable to trust anyone, she began to isolate herself. She began to be afraid that her bitterness would poison their children, so she prayed for the ability to forgive. She was not very successfully initially, but months later she called her ex-husband and said in a halting voice, "I forgive you...and Julianne too."

He laughed - unable to admit his wrong - but somehow, Rebecca felt better anyway. Years passed, then one night the phone rang. The voice on the other end was hysterical. It was Julianne. The police had just informed her of her husband's arrest on solicitation charges. Shame and betrayal overwhelmed her. "No one could understand how I feel!" she thought, and then she remembered. She called the only person she could think of who might understand. She said, "Then I remembered you - you've been through this and you forgave me. I remember the phone call - can I come over? Somehow, Rebecca found the strength to say, "Yes." That night they prayed - the husband-stealer and the abandoned wife, side by side on their knees. Julianne later told Rebecca that that was the night she became a Christian.

Did you notice how you were invited to pass the peace today? To extend forgiveness? Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you," has been drained of most, if not all, of its meaning in its ritual use in modern worship. Most of us use it as an opportunity to simply say "Good morning." Liturgically, it served an important purpose in helping followers of Christ prepare for the Lord's Supper by mutual confession and assurance of forgiveness before God and the restoration of right relationships within the community of faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, professor and theologian wrote *Life Together*, about the preacher's seminary in Finkenwald that was closed by the Nazis. He devotes roughly 1/5th of the book to a discussion of the importance of confession and forgiveness within the Christian community.

"It is possible that Christians may remain lonely in spite of daily worship together, prayer together and all their [common] service...because they enjoy community with one another as pious believers, but not...as sinners. Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious. So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy, for we are in fact sinners..."(p.108)

God wants us to be honest with ourselves and with God. Keeping our confessions a silent, private affair puts us at risk of minimizing our faults or magnifying our weaknesses. Confession is meant as a gift of grace, a benefit of Christian community and fellowship.

"In the presence of another Christian I no longer need to pretend...Christ became our brother in order to help us; through Christ other Christians have become Christ for us in the power and authority of Christ's commandment...Another Christian hears our confession of sin in Christ's place, forgives our sins in Christ's name... When I go to another believer to confess, I am going to God." (p.109)

I'm not advocating a change in our order of worship, inviting public, or even private, confession of personal shortcomings in the sanctuary. But, when you extend the peace of Christ to your neighbor, let it be a reminder to you of the authority Christ has given you and the resource he has given each of us in the community of faith. Do we have anyone in our lives to whom we could turn to share a confession?

The reformation changed the penitential practice of much of Christendom; but the changes were not intended to do away with confession, rather to expand the role of the laity. The priesthood of all believers is a reformed notion which we hold dear; but do we allow ourselves to experience it?

"Those who confess their sins in the presence of another Christian know that they are no longer alone with themselves; they experience the presence of God in the reality of the other. "...the promise of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by another believer as God's command and in God's name." (Life Together, p.113)

Of course, there are risks in transparency of this kind and Bonhoeffer included some practical cautions about those to whom we confess and our own motivations as we do so. But, as radical a notion as this may seem, it's not a practice reserved for Christian heroes or

martyrs. It's consistent with Jesus' instructions to his followers: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And it can still be practiced today.

Greg Jones, Dean of the Divinity School at Duke University, who spoke in this sanctuary on the topic of forgiveness at our Festival of Faith four years ago, encourages confession to a fellow believer. In his landmark book, *Embodying Forgiveness*, Greg calls the practice of confessing your sins to another Christian "reconciling forgiveness" and says it is "a centrally significant practice of Christian life."

"We typically need one another to help us narrate the truth of our lives in both praise and penitence." (p.183). "The practice of reconciling forgiveness presumes...that any of us may not have the best or most truthful perspective on our own life or on issues we face." (p.186).

Earlier this week I was trying to work on my sermon amidst a myriad of meetings, other responsibilities and the welcome interruptions of members and colleagues. (After all, I am an extrovert - any interruption is a welcome interruption!) At my small group, over a breakfast of eggs and coffee, I asked for prayer for the time and the Spirit's guidance to finish the sermon. (Some of you may be praying that prayer right now!) One of my friends said simply, "Put down the books!" Now, this isn't exactly an example of confession; but it does illustrate the power of being known by others who have the opportunity and the invitation to "narrate the truth of our lives" to us. My friend knows that my tendency in preparing papers in college, or sermons now, is to want to do more research than could possibly appear in - or even benefit the sermon, and that at some point, (usually sooner than I would think) I simply need to write it!

Allowing others to speak God's words to us is so important that, as Jones wrote, "It cannot be left to the clergy alone. We need to cultivate patterns of discipleship that enable mutual confession...among particular people within the church." (p.186)

Who might those particular people be? You might find them in a small group, a Bible study, your Reunion Group, or with your family in the car on the way to church - clearly when many young families could use it - or even with old friends over brunch after worship!

What does it mean to be sent as Jesus was sent? When you extend forgiveness, you are speaking for Jesus because you know Him and the Father and you're enacting His will to reconcile us to Himself and to each other. Just by listening to another believer and offering God's words of assurance, you are living out your role as one sent as Christ was sent. In order for us to be the people Jesus sends into a broken and hurting world, extending God's forgiveness to all, we must continue to both seek forgiveness from and extend forgiveness to one another. In such a community, faith and belief can flourish and, in believing, we may indeed have life in his name. Amen.