

“RECLAIMED”

John 20:19-31

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The more I read the Bible, the deeper it cuts into my sense of what it means to follow Jesus. This is particularly true of today's story whose challenge I've managed to side-step in the sermons I've preached before. There are enough words of comfort and reassurance that this is easy to do.

Take for instance the fear that occupies the thoughts of the disciples, a fear that is transformed into joy at the sight of the risen Lord and with his words, "Peace be with you." Such words are sweet in the midst of the bitter pills we sometimes have to swallow in life. They still speak loudly to the fears we have, to the disappointments and pain that disrupts our sense of inner and outer peace. I could and have expanded on this theme before bringing out both the challenge and comfort in Jesus' words.

"Doubting Thomas" is another popular topic for preachers, even though Thomas is no more doubting than the rest of the disciples who were hiding away in a locked room because of their fear, before they saw Jesus. Thomas asks no more of Jesus than the others had already received. Still it's comforting to know that Jesus does not forget Thomas in his despair. We do see in this text a Jesus who responds to our doubts when faith wavers.

The gift of the spirit is another moment in the story that has inspired many a preacher to encourage disciples of Christ on their journey. It recalls that second creation story in Genesis when God breathes into the human being and makes us a living being. There's much to ponder in this aspect.

But there's another part of the story that troubles us, a part that preachers will talk about, but seldom to hear the challenge. No we try to smooth things over, treating it as a troublesome passage, hard to understand. Indeed, we sometimes talk about it as a power given to the disciples that is and should be seldom used. What does it mean when Jesus gives them the power to "retain sins?"

I'll come back to each of these points, but first, let's look at this story in the context of the whole gospel of John. We have, I think, lost the forest for the trees. Now I know in our Bibles that there is another chapter yet, but most scholars agree that this is the original ending of John's gospel. As good as the stories in the next chapter are, they don't appear in the oldest manuscripts.

You may recall from Christmas that John's gospel begins with this idea that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us." John opens with this allusion to the first creation story where the spirit hovers over the face of the earth and God begins to create the world as we know it with a word until we get to the end of the story where God creates

humankind in God's image. The word became flesh and in Jesus the word becomes flesh again. God is revealed through us in that first story and through Jesus in the new creation.

Now in this last story, Jesus tells the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you...." As Jesus revealed God, so now they are called to reveal God, to reflect the words and teachings of Jesus, to reflect the image of God as we were always meant to do.

In the early chapters of Genesis, we are claimed as God's own and sent to tend and nurture the earth. In the first chapter of John, Jesus is claimed by God and sent to empower us to become children of God. And as the gospel ends Jesus reclaims the disciples and sends them to empower others to become children of God.

For this Jesus breathes into them the Spirit, the same spirit that has always belonged to the human being who is fully alive. With the spirit and as a part of the sending, Jesus gives the disciples the power to forgive and retain sins.

We see the power of forgiveness operating in this very story. The disciples are locked up in this room because they are afraid that the Jewish authorities will be coming for them next. Their fear has overwhelmed their faith. And then Jesus turns up without recrimination or rebuke. Instead he offers peace. This is not a peace that makes their circumstance less dangerous, but a peace that encourages them for the hard journey ahead, a peace that reassures them of Jesus' love in the midst of their failure, a peace that reconciles and makes the community of faith whole... or almost whole.

Thomas was missing. Thomas is still lost in his fear, separated now from the rest of the community because he hasn't shared their experience. He hasn't received Jesus' peace. He hasn't been reclaimed yet by Jesus. But his time comes and he receives Jesus' offer of peace and he does something that the others didn't. He completes the circle of reconciliation. He not only accepts Jesus' claim upon him, but he claims Jesus as well with his words, "My Lord and My God." Forgiveness leads to faith.

If only that were always true. How many times has forgiveness encountered the refusal to acknowledge wrong? How many times has the hurt party encountered indifference or belligerence from the offender? For the sake of our souls and our own inner peace, we leave forgiveness on the table. But reconciliation is complete only when forgiveness is received. Or to put it in the language of the other gospels, the kingdom of God is only visible after repentance.

This is where Jesus' empowerment cuts deeply. The church has gladly taken up the power of forgiveness, but reluctant to use its power to retain sins. For fear of conflict, we have been slow to challenge evil. Even worse, we have at times and in certain places endorsed evil. We have offered theological justification for the abuse and enslavement of native peoples in our effort to colonize the world for Christ. White supremacy and Apartheid were endorsed by Christian theologians. We are afraid to condemn the racist

policies of the state of Israel toward the Palestinian people lest we be labeled anti-Semitic.

In the name of forgiveness, we have excused a great deal of sin and only half-fulfilled Jesus' commission to the disciples. We are given the care of the earth and its peoples. Forgiveness will not make it whole if we excuse rape for the sake of the team's success. Forgiveness will not heal the earth if we continue to excuse pollution of our waters, air, and habitat for the sake of corporate profits. Forgiveness will not bring peace if we continue to stack the deck against the poor or foster lies about the stranger and nurse fears of those who are different.

We sometimes limit God's love to the experience of mercy, but it also speaks through the commitment to justice. Jesus spoke loudly and often to the abuses of authority in his day. His teachings condemned the hypocrisy of the wealthy. He denied entry into the joy of the master to those who refused to share with the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the ill, and the imprisoned. He proclaimed God's desire for the release of the oppressed. Alongside the offer of forgiveness was always the call to repentance.

There's so much that is beautiful about our world and about its people. This is, after all, God's world and we are God's children, all of us. The practice of forgiveness nurtures health and wholeness, restores the earth and human relationships, and draws us nearer to God.

But we're not healthy. The world is broken for all the evil that is excused, evil that has always been there, and evil which Jesus stood against. When people come to their senses as the prodigal son did, they will need forgiveness to rejoin the human community, which at its best does reflect the kingdom of God. But they'll never come asking if no one names the harm that they've caused.

Paul Simpson Duke sums up the story this way: "The whole scene is about Jesus rising into the life of the community. Into their entombment he enters. Their fear gives way to his peace. In them, his joy rises. His being sent lives in their being sent. His breath is now breathing in them. His bearing away the sin of the world will now be expressed in their bearing away of sin" (p.325).

We're working on faith statements now in confirmation class. Last week we were talking about the Holy Spirit, which as many of you know, we used to call the Holy Ghost. So we were talking about the nature of ghosts when Sam said that ghosts are said to walk the earth because they have "unfinished business."

So think about it. Jesus, claimed by God, enters our world and claims the disciples, teaching them and showing them about God and about who they are in relation to God. Then he dies and the community falls apart, hiding away in fear when he shows up to reclaim them, and now empowers them. Why? Because Jesus hasn't finished everything he intended, and as I said last week, his time on earth is done. So through

the gift of the spirit, the disciples take up this unfinished business which Jesus has framed in this business of forgiving and retaining sins.

Now it's relatively easy for us to accept the responsibility for forgiveness being so much in need of it ourselves, but who are we to take up the business of naming evil? Who are we to call others to repentance? That's the question we stumble over, the responsibility we are reluctant to take up, the unfinished business that never gets any easier. It is a task that must be taken up with humility.

But taken up it must be. It is the world's only hope. The gospel tells us that we are claimed by God, made in God's image, given the breath of life. And that we have been claimed by Jesus in his life and teaching and reclaimed by his resurrection. Who are we? We are God's children and the only question that remains to us is how we will answer the call. Jesus sends us, but will we share the response and the faith of Thomas, and claim Jesus as alive for us, saying "My Lord and my God?"

Amen.

Resource:

Feasting on the Gospels, John, Vol. 2, Paul Simpson Duke.