

John 20:19-23

Reader: When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said,

People: 'Peace be with you.'

Reader: After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again,

People: 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'

Reader: When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,

People: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Awakening to Ministry

Some of you may remember me reminiscing about my Uncle Dale, my favorite uncle. From the time I was three years old until I was about seven, my parents would take me to my grandparents' cottage on a small lake in Michigan, and Uncle Dale would always take me and my brother and sister fishing. He started me off with a simple fishing "pole" - nothing but string, a hook, and a bobber connected - but I eventually graduated to a rod and reel. And you may wonder, "How much havoc can a child wreak with a rod and reel?" Well I think I had a knack for wreaking havoc with these simple devices, because I remember Uncle Dale spending an inordinate amount of time untangling my fishing line. What did I get it tangled in? Usually someone else's fishing line, or something at the bottom of the lake, or just tangled up in the reel. To this day I look at a fishing reel with trepidation, afraid that once I cast my line that will end up spending the next hour getting un-snagged and never catch a single fish.

Well, I tell you this story to make the point that the simplest things placed in the wrong hands can cause a lot of trouble. The Bible is one of those things. Some of you who have grown up Catholic have shared with me how much you appreciate that we really focus on the Bible in the Methodist Church, but I'll tell you that I fully understand why some churches do not encourage their parishioners to read the Bible, because placed in the wrong hands the Bible can cause a lot of trouble. It's not the Bible's fault any more than it was my fishing reel's fault for getting all tangled and knotted up on those summer expeditions, but people are quite prone to misuse the Bible and cause a lot of problems in so doing.

Take today's scripture passage as a small example. Now I have a very critical eye, and I can usually focus in on a passage that prone to be misinterpreted or misused if placed in the wrong hands. Can you see what verse in today's passage has the potential to be misused? You probably guessed it; it was the last verse we read: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now some will take this passage as a *carte blanche* to withhold forgiveness from some people for some offenses, but this is not an arbitrary thing. I've heard that so often; "I can't forgive that person." Be careful about that; when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray "to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others," he goes on to say, "for if you don't forgive others how do you expect your heavenly Father to forgive you?" I

think what this passage means by saying that you *retain* is really about someone who is unrepentant, someone who denies their sin and persists in committing the sin, and from a church community point of view, someone who is damaging the community by their persistent sinful behavior. In this sense, the disciples who will go on to lead the church are going to have to make some tough decisions when people in the church community are destroying that community, and it's not so much the disciples who will be retaining the sin but the person who is damaging the community who is retaining the sin. So this passage is not a *carte blanche* for you or me to arbitrarily decide to *not* forgive someone.

And if we take our lesson from our Gospel lesson today, the first thing that we'll see is that forgiveness is the first and most important component of our ministry. The second thing we'll see is that Christ's forgiveness empowers us not by authorizing us to decide who we forgive and who we don't forgive, but by bringing the news of forgiveness to others, in the church and outside of the church.

The passage starts off on "the evening of that day," that is, Easter day, the day of Jesus' resurrection. And remember what has happened in the story so far. Mary Magdalene has met Jesus, who she mistook for a gardener, outside the empty tomb. John and Peter have seen the empty tomb, but they haven't seen Jesus. Mary has told them about her encounter, but we don't know if they actually believed her. It's doubtful that they did, because let's face it, people who are crucified and placed in a tomb for 48 hours don't generally get up and walk around. So suffice it to say that the disciples would have been a wee bit skeptical about Mary's testimony. Mary, in their eyes, is just a hysterical woman traumatized by the death of someone she loves, and living in denial of that fact. They know that Jesus is dead.

And what they are feeling is far worse than depression over the loss of a friend and teacher. They are feeling far worse than that, and their distress is coming from two directions; from the inside and from the outside. From the inside, they're feeling remorse. The man they called master had been arrested, tried and murdered in a gruesome and undignified manner, and they scattered like cockroaches when Jesus was arrested. That's why Peter three times denied even knowing Jesus. They hadn't exactly been faithful friends when the proverbial poop hit the fan. And hadn't Jesus mentioned that if anyone wanted to be his disciple that they must be prepared to "take up the cross" and follow him? Let's face it; these guys dropped the cross and ran! They knew that they had let Jesus down, and if anyone was in need of forgiveness it was them.

That's the distress from inside; the feeling of having let someone down terribly, and not really having someone to say "I'm sorry" to. The other kind of distress came from outside; particularly the high priests and the Romans. Who was to say that there weren't soldiers out looking for these guys even as they spoke...or didn't speak because they were afraid of making any noise? They were scared, they were sad, and they were discouraged when Jesus decides to show up in their midst.

And notice how Jesus greets them: "Peace be with you." He didn't chastise them for abandoning him, for not standing beside him, or dying beside him. He "passed the peace" with them – something I was reading as I was preparing this; the way early Christians understood the passing of the peace. Both Peter and Paul in their New Testament letters write that brothers and sisters in

Christ should greet one another with a holy kiss. A kiss was probably a trademark of this new religious sect known as “the Way.” It’s likely that Jesus taught his disciples to do the same, thus when Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane, it probably didn’t seem at all unusual to the other disciples – they were used to that kind of greeting to each other. When Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” when he initiates the “passing of the peace,” it wasn’t simply a smile and a handshake; it was an expression of real love. It was an expression of close friendship, or of being part of a family. It’s an expression of the type of relationship that Jesus wants us to have with him and with one another.

And it’s an indication that *all is forgiven* – how can there really be *peace* between you and another person if there is bitterness and pride, if you are withholding forgiveness? The next time we pass the peace, which will actually be later today, think about that. “Peace be with you” were the first words that Jesus uttered to his disciples after his resurrection. It was an act of reconciliation. It was saying, “You are forgiven; I refuse to retain any of your sins. Let there be true peace between us.” No mention is made of any of the disciples *asking* Jesus for forgiveness; Jesus simply declares forgiveness, implies forgiveness, when he says, “Peace be with you.” And the same should hold true for us as a church, as the body of Christ. When we pass the peace, it ought to communicate that I hold nothing against you, that there is indeed true peace between you and me.

And that peace and that fellowship are trademarks of God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We are the holy community, the holy “city on the hill.” And when we embrace that fact, and exercise that kind of forgiveness among ourselves, we start living like citizens of God’s kingdom.

But that’s not all. I mentioned that the disciples felt distress from forces outside of themselves, outside of the room where they were hiding. They felt threatened by the world outside, by the supposed powers of this world. But Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples – a kind of kiss in and of itself – and commissions them to forgive as he forgave, to go into places where there is fear, and guilt, and shame, and say, “Peace be with you.” He sends them out to spread his kingdom, which does not operate in any way like the kingdoms of this world, and cannot be thwarted by the kingdoms of this world – that’s what the resurrection proves. God has the power to overthrow sin and overcome death. And so those outside kingdoms are all illusory – they exercise no authority over you, because you are under the authority of the Holy Spirit. And you bring good news of God’s kingdom to a world that is so subsumed in darkness.

Today’s gospel lesson shows us Christian ministry in a nutshell. Christ died for our sins – we no longer need to carry them like heavy baggage, and Christ rose for our salvation, so we are free from the fear of oppression and we are empowered to bring the good news of forgiveness and freedom to both the oppressor and the oppressed.

And soon we will be bringing in Jeremy Joseph into this holy community where we will hopefully teach him this good news, and more importantly *live* that good news in order that he might experience the true joy of this fellowship, of forgiveness and grace, and he too will bring this good news to others.