

Power for Pardon

a sermon based on

John 20:19-31 and 1 Peter 1:3-9

and delivered on

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for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Let's not talk about Thomas today. Shall we? Every year, the first Sunday after Easter (or the second Sunday of Easter, if you will) we hear the story about how Thomas wasn't in the room when Jesus appeared to the disciples on that day of Resurrection, but then a week later (i.e. today), he is there and believes. Let's not talk about that today. Okay?

I say that, because our familiarity with that story drives us right past this wonderful news that comes right before we hear of Thomas' absence. Hear the beginning of that passage again:

¹⁹“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, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘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.’” (Jn 20:19-23)

Jesus breathed on them. Some translations say he breathed *into* them. Where have we heard that language before? Oh, yeah! Genesis 2:7, “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” In that passage from 1 Peter 1: 3b-4 earlier, we hear, “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and (emphasis added) into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

The first thing Jesus does when he meeting his disciples and convincing them it is really him, is to breath into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says (Jn 20:22b). He imparts new life. Whereas when the Lord God breathed life into the first man and then gave him purpose to tend to his creation in the garden, Jesus, the risen Christ, now gives purpose to the new life he has breathed into the disciples. What is that purpose? “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (Jn 20:23) If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. That's big stuff!

Before he was transfigured, Jesus had already sent out forty disciples in pairs with power to heal the sick and cast out demons. Now, he says, “If you (the Greek, here, is plural) forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” Jesus himself had been accused of blasphemy when he told the paralytic man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” (Mt 9:2-8; also Mk 2:4-12 & Lk 5:18-25) People were okay – people are okay – with healing someone's physical infirmity. People weren't – people still aren't okay – with liberating someone from the quagmire of his or her sins. We want to know that the score is settled. And then, what?

“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Pet 1:3b) “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3:16-17) This is the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading.

Later on in 1 Peter 2:9, we hear, “(Y)ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We Protestants sometimes muddle that notion of the priesthood of all believers, thinking that it means none of us needs a priest to mediate between ourselves and God. We ignore the repeated references to Christ as a high priest in Hebrews: a high priest implies other priests. As it says in Hebrews, “Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ...But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises.” (Heb 8:1-2, 6)

So? Where do we fit into this?

As those born into a royal priesthood – as those who have been given new birth into a living hope through resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – as those who have been baptized into the fellowship of disciples which is the Church as heirs to the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have the power of pardon. We have the privileged authority to heal the rift between flawed human beings and God Almighty. How cool is that? How scary is that?

Not only do we have the authority to forgive, but to bind. Let me be clear. This is not an authority that rests upon any one of us as individuals but does belong to each of us as part of the Church. Maybe that's why whenever Paul lists the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he doesn't list this one. It's not peculiar to any one of us; nor does it rest on any one of us.

Some interpreters would limit this authority to those in apostolic succession, as if Jesus only offered that blessing on the ten apostles who were there at the moment. A close reading of the text, however, tells us that Jesus appeared to the *disciples* in the house where they were hidden. The twelve were not the only disciples. In fact, later in this very passage when in reference to Thomas' absence, John specifies that he was one of the twelve: a distinction from the disciples?

Our scandal is that the world doesn't know this. Our scandal is that the world doesn't know that the Church of Jesus Christ exists solely to heal human separation from the God and even our first nature. On one hand the prosperity preachers and the self-righteous fundamentalists have done a bang up job of making their voice heard. While at the same time, much of the church has become content with doing good deeds and offering what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. That is offering care for one's mind and body, but ignoring the debilitating power of sin in persons' lives. When Jesus warned against pointing out other's sins, it wasn't so that we would ignore them. Instead, first he wanted us to claim healing for ourselves so that like the convalescent plasma therapy in which blood from those who've recovered from covid-19 is transfused into someone else so that the healing antibodies can be passed on, we do the same with the living hope into which we've been reborn and the authority to do so which came (pardon the pun) straight from Jesus' mouth.

While we are reminded that we need to be holy and to strive for holiness, it is not for our forgiveness but so that we have something healthy to offer. There may be some pain or discomfort. Just ignoring sin or excusing it by deciding that we're going to be affirm others no matter what, falls into the category of retaining sins. Doesn't it? Unfortunately the self-righteous fundamentalists whom I mentioned earlier, make that harder to do and still sound loving. Just like the reaction to fat-shamers has led some in the positive body image movement to reject any notion that obesity really is bad for those like me. But when a physician says, I have some things that will help, that's good to hear. None of us would want to find out that we are infected with the novel coronavirus. Would we? But if you were, wouldn't you want to know that there's a treatment? That's the scary thing now. We're not sure about a treatment for coronavirus. But we do have a cure for the way that our sins separate us from God.

We have the power of pardon. We have the power to tell each and every person – not only with our lips but with our lives – that they are precious and worthy of God's love, and that whatever stands in the way of that it can be cast aside as if it never existed.

We have the power to take that good news in other directions. We can speak up against any voice that say someone isn't worthy of the dignity that comes with being made in the image of God. Having ancestors from Asia is no more a responsibility for covid-19 than it is a sin. We need to speak up against that and to call out racism and all forms of bigotry for the sins that they are, and to bind those attitudes to sin.

As a disciple – as a follower – of Jesus Christ have power to offer pardon. Through him, you have the capacity to make others see that the maker of the universe considers them worthwhile. You have that capacity – that power – not because you're a great orator (Moses stuttered) – not

because you're so happy all the time (Jeremiah was a whiner) – not because you're such an optimist (Ezekiel wasn't) — not because you always know the right thing to say (Peter didn't) – not because you've always valued the church (Paul persecuted it) – an not because you're so sure of yourself and your faith (Great, now we're back to Thomas): you have that capacity because Jesus has forgiven you and; as a part of his Church, he said so. AMEN.