

Sermon—April 19, 2009

Second Sunday of Easter

“...he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” *John 20:22-23*

And there I stood, outside of the closed door to the room in our house where she was studying. I heard rock music on the other side, which was not being played softly, as if you can play rock music softly. “This is part of the issue,” I reminded myself. But I was not standing there to justify my ego or to excuse my prior mistakes. I was there to ask forgiveness. I knocked on the door. “Come in,” responded the familiar voice of my daughter, competing for volume with *The Grateful Dead* or *The Spice Girls* or whoever captured the imagination of 14 year old girls in that era. “Honey,” I began, feeling at that point, I suppose, like the great and powerful Oz when Toto pulled back the curtain to reveal to Dorothy an embarrassed paper tiger. But at least I had come of my own volition. I had admitted to myself my mistakes in parenting, some of which recently had surfaced more acutely, and was going to be man enough to admit it to the victim. Well it was almost of my own volition. As I remember now, a certain wife and mother was not remiss in her feminine duties of trying to maintain peace and tranquility in

the household and of taking down the alpha male a peg or two when the situation demanded her nurturing intervention. So there I was, face to face with my very own daughter, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood—I, the master of his castle, struggling to find words of apology. I swallowed my pride and out they came, haltingly but sincerely. My youthful offspring would prove to be most gracious. “That’s OK Dad. I love you.” I think in the ensuing 16 years I have had to repeat that scene a time or two more. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Only the rock bands are different.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” Are all of our mistakes sins? Aren’t we allowed a few flub ups, an innocent goof here and there? Do we have to ask forgiveness for every little thing? And can we sneak in maybe even one or two wallpaloozers before God takes out his black pen and starts keeping score in that big Book of Life? I don’t think my mind knows what distinguishes a misdeed from a sin. Who decides and where do we draw the line? I’m not sure it matters. In either case our heart tells us to make amends, to seek restitution, to offer apology. Our hearts convict us. I sort of envision our conscience as the fifth chamber of the heart rather than another lobe of the brain. As the First Epistle of John says in today’s first reading, we are created to be children of light. If we feel we are walking in darkness-- we feel shame for our dishonesty or deception or we have hurt someone by what we have said or done or left undone—then whether we

call it a sin or not, God is calling us to turn around and take the righteous path, the path of light.

I am used to talking about asking for forgiveness for my own sins. I dutifully recite the Confession of Sin most every week in the Eucharist and petition God to forgive me in my private prayers. But what about **my** offering reconciliation to another person? Is that not part of our Lord's wishes also? It seems to be especially what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. "If you forgive the sins of, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Now if I offer forgiveness to someone else, am I speaking for God or for myself? Do you and I have the right to speak for God, to proffer his forgiveness to another? If I have been hurt, then isn't it really a matter between the offender and me? In this reading from John, our Lord is speaking to his disciples. Many scholars have interpreted this passage concerning the authority to forgive sins as a commissioning of the Church at large, and especially of the ecclesiastical authorities. But as for me, you and I are the Church as much as anybody else. We are implored not only to ask for forgiveness but also to offer it. We need to be in the business of lifting burdens from the shoulders of others and helping to lighten the load of anyone with a guilty conscience. And even for people who don't seem to have much of a conscience at all, being offered forgiveness is a powerful testimony to the compassion you and I share in Christ. Individually and

collectively we can be that person and those people who present Christ's light to others so that together we can all be children of the light. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." What awesome power God has bestowed on you and me! What disconcerting responsibility he has given us. But he must think we can do it because he has given it to us to do. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things," to quote I Corinthians. Forgiving the other is the ultimate act of love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

But where do I muster the where-with-all to forgive? From whence comes that will to be able to humbly pardon someone with whom I have serious grievances, with someone who has betrayed me, with someone who has dishonored me, with someone who has abused me, with someone who is otherwise despicable? Where does that capacity come from? Not from my own ego. Not from that place within me that is responsible for pride and reprisal. Not even from that place that demands justice. And especially not from any place where I insist on sole jurisdiction, isolated from Christ. The ability to forgive does not come easily or naturally to us. It is not instinctive. It comes from that place where mercy and love are found—from that region within that is in communion with the Holy Spirit, that is the dwelling place of Christ, our soul. In matters of forgiveness our minds

fail us, our wills fail us, even our moral code of ethics fails us. Without the guidance of the Spirit, our connection with God in Christ, we struggle to find compassion. The isolation engendered by our fearful primeval need for safety and security deprives us of the loving relationship with God which is the source of our loving relationships with one another. And only out of this sustaining well of love in the depths of our souls are we able effectively to draw the waters of reconciliation and forgiveness. God gives us what we need to obey his command to love one another, to forgive one another. He gives us himself.

I ask you, what does forgiveness look like? Does it look like continuing to speak in anger and vindictiveness with someone who has hurt us? Does it look like wishing ill on someone or a group of people with whom we have a quarrel? Does it look like an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? What **does** forgiveness look like? Only in relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit will we be able to answer that question. "...he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" It is not something we are capable of knowing otherwise.

Through us humans, God is forging his plan of salvation. He uses you and me as his agents of forgiveness. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given **us** the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal

through **us...**” It is we who do God’s work. “That’s OK Dad. I love you.” **That**
is what forgiveness looks like. AMEN