

Jn 20:19-23
 12 June 2011
 Pentecost

“Spirit to Forgive”

I want to begin with a story about something that happened over twenty years ago. This was when I was a student at Southeastern College in Lakeland, Florida. For two semesters, I was part of a street ministry team that traveled to Tampa on Friday nights.

The part of town we went to was not on the tourist brochures—at least, based on the way it looked **then**, my guess is that wouldn't have been. Our “parish,” so to speak, was a half-mile strip along Kennedy Boulevard. Our “parishioners” were the street people who lived, and passed through, the area.

On my very first night, the very first person I approached was a gentleman clad in shabby-looking clothing. He appeared to be in his fifties. Not knowing what else to say, I told him, “Jesus loves you.” As soon as he heard that, he began crying and telling me how he had lost his family and his career. I don't remember if it was because of drinking or gambling or something else, but he laid out for me an autobiography of his misdeeds.

When he was finished listing his failures, he asked me if I would forgive him. At the time, I was thinking, “It's not my job to forgive him. I need to direct him to Christ.” So I told the man that Jesus forgives anyone and anything. But that didn't work. It seemed like he needed to hear the words, so again he asked me, “Do you forgive me?” I relented and said, “I forgive you.” And with that, he shuffled away into the Tampa night.

Why do I begin with this story of speaking and hearing words of forgiveness? One might ask, “Is this a theme for Pentecost?” It's not even about the Day of Pentecost! I begin with this story on forgiveness because Jesus **makes** it a theme in our gospel reading from John.

I should say that some people refer to the event in our gospel text as a “pre-Pentecost” Pentecost. Already, on the evening of the day of his resurrection, on the evening of Easter, Jesus is giving his disciples the Holy Spirit.

I don't know about anyone else, but if you picture this, to me it seems kind of funny. “Receive the Holy Spirit” (v. 22). That's what he says after he **breathes** on them. (*Blow!*) Really? Is that what it takes?

Of course, we should realize that this isn't the **only** time that John interprets the Hebrew word רוח (*ruah*) in his gospel. That word means “breath,” “spirit,” or “wind.” In chapter 3 in their nocturnal meeting, Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to “see the kingdom of God [one must be] born from above,” or born again (v. 3). Nicodemus brilliantly wonders how, after one is grown, it's possible to re-enter the mother's womb.

In verse 8, Jesus tells him, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” So I suppose it **would** make sense for Jesus to use his breath in granting the Spirit to his disciples!

But we need to back up and see what's going on, since this is the evening of Easter. Verse 19 says that "the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities" (Good News Bible). Like we saw last week in Luke 24, Jesus suddenly appears out of nowhere and says, "Peace be with you." He shows them the now-glorified wounds on his hands and side. He isn't a ghost.

In any event, we're told that the disciples have been hiding from the authorities. No doubt, they have feared for their lives. Before he appears to them, with his words of shalom, they're thinking about what happened to Jesus. Still, Craig Barnes, who is pastor and head of staff at Shadyside Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, thinks there's more to it. If one understands the human psyche, it seems to be an unavoidable conclusion.

Barnes speaks about, not only fear, but shame. "Like the disciples," he says, "we try to hide when we're ashamed."¹ It's a defense mechanism; it's almost instinct. It may seem like a good strategy for a little while. But, as Barnes says, "Nothing is more crippling to our souls than working at hiding shame. We lock up more and more doors, sealing off more and more rooms of the heart to prevent our true selves from being discovered. We think we are keeping the world out, but in fact we are keeping ourselves locked in."

The disciples are ashamed because, when Jesus needed them the most, they turned around and ran. They carry a horrible burden of guilt.

But thank God, that isn't the end of it. "At the center of the gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ has come looking for us. According to John's text, he walks right through the locked door to find us. He shows us his wounds from the cross, which are the marks of our forgiveness."

With verse 23, we come to what I said earlier may be an unexpected theme for Pentecost: speaking and hearing words of forgiveness, or more directly, forgiving and refusing to forgive. Right after Jesus tells the disciples "Receive the Holy Spirit," he adds, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus entrusts the disciples with a great deal of authority. It isn't something they have, in and of themselves, but as the community gathered in his name. As the community—as the church—they have the authority to offer forgiveness of sin. We do something similar to that every week with our prayer of confession and assurance of pardon.

Jesus is speaking about something very powerful. On the one hand, if we forgive someone, they are forgiven. In Matthew 18, Peter has a little chat with Jesus about that (v. 21). On the other hand, if we retain the sins of any, they are retained. The Good News Bible says that "if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

The Greek has a stronger force than that. First of all, the word for "to forgive" (*αφιημι*, *aphiēmi*) also means "to send off," "to let go." I think anytime we're able to forgive, we can feel what it means "to let go." It's a burden that we're glad we can be rid of.

On the flip side, there's an equally strong force. The words "retain" and "not forgive" don't quite capture it. The Revised English Bible says that "if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain." The Greek word for "retain" (*κρατεω*, *krateō*)

¹ www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3138

also means “to hold,” “to seize.” It comes from the word (κρατος, *kratos*) that means “strength” or “power.” It takes a lot of strength to hold on to that stuff. You wear yourself out.

According to the New Testament, we are a “holy” and “royal priesthood” (1 Pe 2:5, 9). One of the key roles of a priest is to declare the forgiveness of sins. We’re told that “we disciples are not called to **produce** forgiveness. We’re called to be the priest pronouncing that which has **been** produced on the cross. We’re called to open the locks and throw open the door, and walk back into the world as a priest who is unafraid. The only alternative is to live in shrinking prisons of hurt.”²

Sometimes I’ve heard it said that to forgive means pretending that the other person didn’t do anything wrong. (Now, I’m not including the times when someone says, “I forgive you for the terrible thing you did. I will now graciously accept your most humble apology!” All this, when you’re pretty sure that you **didn’t** do anything wrong, at least, **that** time!) Inherent to the idea of forgiving is that an offense **was** committed.

I’ve also sometimes heard it said that forgiving also means forgetting. In order to forgive, we have to forget. I would humbly have to disagree. I don’t believe that we are called to display amnesia. I don’t believe that we are called to have the attention span of gnats. That doesn’t improve the character of **either** party. That doesn’t help us deal with life.

As much as the disciples locked in that room might want it to—and believe me, I have had the same feeling—they will still have to deal with their own stuff.

There’s a psychological concept known as “the shadow.” It’s described as “the place we put all the suppressed and repressed parts of our lives.”³ That doesn’t mean evil. Rather, it’s the stuff about us that we want to keep hidden from the world, and even from ourselves. It’s the stuff that we find embarrassing and shameful, rightly or wrongly.

As Richard Rohr says, “Suppressing what we don’t want to deal with is like trying to hold a basketball underwater while going on with life as usual...What we suppress—the shadow aspect of life—ambushes us sooner or later. We don’t know why we’re depressed or angry, why everyone and everything is out to get us.”⁴

One big sign of some major repression is the lack of a sense of humor. Can we laugh at ourselves? (That may be an unfair question. Not everyone has the overwhelming abundance of material I possess which is needed in order to laugh at oneself!)

He continues, “People who are overly stern and moralistic usually have a significant, repressed shadow. They walk through life shaking a judgmental finger in disapproval—and they disapprove of just about everything! They’re often incapable of easy enjoyment.”⁵

I fully believe that humor is one of the greatest gifts of the Holy Spirit. I say that because I can recall a time when I **had no** genuine, joyful sense of humor. Was I a jerk who thought humor consisted of snide comments and sarcastic remarks? Yes. I was a

² www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3138

³ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 129.

⁴ Rohr, 196.

⁵ Rohr, 197.

living example of the description of having “no patience, no forgiveness, no mercy, but only harsh judgments. No gospel.”⁶ No good news.

Looking at our text, one sign that we’re open to the Holy Spirit is: how willing, and able, we are to forgive. Both are important. There must be both the willingness and the ability. Remember, just as the disciples find out in their encounter with Jesus, the ability to forgive is a gift. But the willingness must also be present. We need to have a spirit to forgive.

In 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul tells us that “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17). That is the deep meaning of Pentecost. The Spirit of God brings freedom; the Spirit of God liberates. As people of the Spirit, we reclaim our identity when we send out—when we unleash—the forgiveness of Christ.

When we allow that Spirit to run free in the world, who knows what dangerous and wonderful things will happen? Why don’t we find out?

⁶ Rohr, 198.