

The Second Sunday of Easter + May 1, 2011

Years ago, I made a terrible mistake, one that a pastor should never make while leading worship on Sunday morning. I can't really explain how it happened, but it happened nonetheless. I forgot the Lord's Prayer! I think I was preoccupied and wasn't in the right space. When it came time to lead the congregation in praying the Lord's Prayer, my mind and heart went somewhere else and I completely skipped over it. It was an accident, an oversight. It's the only time it ever happened but little did I know that the omission would stir up some intense reaction. After the service that day a member of the congregation pointed out my sin of omission. I was very apologetic. In spite of my contrite spirit, the person who pointed out the error chastised me and said that this was a very serious error. Finally, after saying I was sorry for the second or third time, I wanted to know why this prayer was so special, so important, and so integral to this person's experience of worship. So, we discussed why the Lord's Prayer was so special for her and in the midst of our conversation I pointed out one of the features of the Lord's Prayer that I found especially important ... "Forgive us our trespasses (sins) as we forgive those who trespasses (sin) against us." I wondered if that wasn't a really important part of the prayer since that's what Jesus expects from those who follow him and suggested that the ministry of forgiveness might apply in this situation. Since we did not say the prayer earlier in the service the two of us could say it together then and especially focus on that part about forgiving the Pastor who had grievously sinned against the church that very morning! Yes, I said, that portion of the prayer would apply right then and there! Suddenly a broad smile came over her face and we both chuckled and moved on as though nothing had ever happened. Then I silently offered a prayer of gratitude to God for the gift of forgiveness as it is described in the Lord's Prayer.

One of the great privileges in serving as a Pastor is the opportunity to declare the gift of God's forgiveness. I get to do that routinely when confession and forgiveness is part of our Sunday worship. It is something I get to do when people meet me for individual confession. And it is a declaration I get to make at other times too, in preaching and teaching and visits, and most often in conversation. What a joy it is to declare the mercy of God! And in addition to declaring it, I have the joy (like you) of receiving it. Isn't that one of the joys of the Christian life, to know God as the author and dispenser of forgiveness and to be on the receiving of forgiveness.

As I said last Sunday, Easter is more than a day. Easter is a fifty day feast. We are now in the season of Easter and celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus and it is a time of great joy. During this 50 day Easter feast we get to explore what it means

for us to live as people of the Resurrection. A wonderful phrase has captured the imagination of many Christians in recent years. The phrase is this: “Practice Resurrection.” During these fifty days of Easter that is what we get to do! To explore what it looks like to practice resurrection and forgiveness is at the very heart and center of living the Christian life. Practicing forgiveness is a way of practicing resurrection.

How is that we Christians may be practitioners of forgiveness? How is that we may speak forgiveness and live forgiveness and put it into practice in our church community, our relationships, our families, our places of work? Well, as the Lord’s Prayer so rightfully instructs us, what we get to do is put into practice the very power that the Risen Jesus himself gives to us. You see, Jesus gives us what we need to practice forgiveness. Jesus gives us what we cannot supply on our own.

Jesus appears to the disciples huddling in fear behind locked doors on that Easter night and what does he do? What are the first words that come out of his mouth? “Peace.” Jesus says “Peace be with you.” And then he commissions them. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathes on 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.” Jesus gives them ... Jesus gives us what we need. He commissions us and sends us to do God’s work and we could not ask for a better resource: the gift of God’s own Spirit breathed into the community that bears his name and breathed into our very bodies.

We may practice forgiveness because the Risen Jesus has breathed on us and continues to give us what we truly need. To those fearful disciples huddled behind locked doors on that Easter night, he removes their fear by showing them his wounded hands and side and giving them peace. Giving them his very self and breathing on them his presence that results in the ministry forgiveness. Still, the Risen One fills the church with the gift and grace of forgiveness.

I find it sad that so many people have been burned by the church because they have not experienced much forgiveness there. It as though we’ve failed to tap the very power God has bestowed on us. Sad, that for so many folks the church is not a community of forgiveness but has become a place of finger-pointing, criticism, and condemnation. Instead of getting the message that we are loved as we are we sometimes get the message that we do not measure up or are not good enough because somewhere along the way, decided that its primary business was to set the world straight with good rules. But the call to do justice and love kindness can never be trapped in rules or rigidity for once we try to do that all kindness and

justice disappears. The world knows all about that sort of thing, I think the church's first word must always be grace. It must always be forgiveness. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus says that he gives us the kind of peace the world cannot give. Peace, you see, as Jesus gives it, is more than the absence of conflict. Peace is Jesus' very presence. It is the presence of the risen Christ who ministers to us with his life-giving wounds, breathes on us his Spirit and commissions us to do God's work of forgiveness. Peace, remember, is Jesus' first word to his disciples.

In a few moments we will share the Peace. It is what we do always after the prayers and before we enter into the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. I remember and many of you may, too, when the sharing of the Peace was new ... when it made its way back into the liturgy. I say "made its way back" because it is actually quite ancient and dates back to at least the 2nd century. When the green book, the LBW, came out in 1978, so did the sharing of the Peace as a new gesture for many folks. It met with some resistance. I heard the story of one person show turned to share the peace and the person to whom she was about to share the pace refused and flatly said, "I don't believe in that stuff!" I heard of a Roman Catholic Nun who liked the idea but wasn't sure about the gesture. She didn't want to shake hands with all those folks. So, she stood by the Sacristy and blew kisses. Maybe that was a little more in line with the earliest Christians for whom this gesture was the Kiss of peace. So, there was resistance. I wonder, though, if the resistance wasn't rooted in something more. For you see, the sharing of the Peace isn't just an opportunity to say "Good morning." It isn't merely a way of saying "hello" or getting into conversation and catching up on the latest news. It is a way of acting out with our bodies the very truth of God. One of its ancient meanings is that it can function as a gesture of forgiveness, so that if you had a beef with a sister or brother you could share the peace of Christ before dining together in unity and peace at the Lord's Table. And it is Christ' peace, Christ's forgiveness that we share. I wonder if the resistance comes from fear of begin changed by holy things and holy touch.

Christ's Peace does not come from us, but to know that it is within us or a power at work among us is at once radical and wonderful. It says that God is still up to something in the church and in the world and that God's continues to save and redeem and deliver just as God did all those wonderful works of salvation that we read about in the Scripture. The Risen Christ is truly among us. In our midst. And in our very bodies. Now, should that really surprise us? After all, the Risen Jesus breathed on us the Holy Spirit. "Receive the Holy Spirit ..." So, we may practice peace. We may practice resurrection. The power is here among us and breathed into our very lives. What an amazing power! Let's use it well. Amen.