

“Forgiven and Forgiving”

Among church folk the Sunday after Easter Day is called “Low Sunday.” It has nothing to do with the liturgy or the readings. It is totally based on the fact that after the intensity of Lent and Easter attendance on second Sunday of Easter is often low.

I suppose it can also be called Low Sunday because it comes after the mountain top experience of Easter Day. Easter gives us glorious music, hope filled scriptures, the return of the Alleluias, and, this year, our first Holy Communion in many months. It is hard to follow the excitement of last week.

Yet, today we have a rich reading from John that is important for all to hear. Usually we focus solely on “Doubting Thomas,” but there is more to this reading than his story. The portion of the reading before Thomas focuses on Jesus’ first appearance to the disciples. In that section of the reading two important things happen. First, Jesus changes the status of the disciples. Second, he gives them an important role in the coming Kingdom of God.

You might be forgiven for missing the first of the important parts of the reading. When Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” With those few words he changes his followers’ status from that of disciple (the Greek word for student) to that of apostle (the Greek word for those who are sent). No longer are the twelve students studying under the master. Now their work is to take the master’s teachings out into the world. The disciples have had a commencement ceremony and are ready to make their way out in the real world.

Jesus also makes it clear that besides sharing the message they have a very important duty. That is, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” These new apostles are now in the business of forgiving sins. That is a big deal. You will remember that some of Jesus’ opponents quarreled with him when he forgave sins. They believed that only God could forgive sins. Now Jesus says that this group of disciples turned apostles have that authority.

The late Robert Capon, Episcopal priest and New Testament scholar, says that forgiveness is the primary role of the Church. In his book *Hunting the Divine Fox: An Introduction to the Language of Theology* he wrote:

The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things considered. The history of the world’s moral codes is a monument to the labors of many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all different should be locked up in a library and be made to read three days’ worth of them. He would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

What the world cannot get right, however, is the forgiveness business—and that, of course, is the church’s real job. She is in the world to deal with the Sin which the world can’t turn off or escape from. She is not in the business of telling the world what’s right and wrong so that it can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world which knows all about that tiresome subject, forgiveness for its chronic unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute she even hints that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christianity becomes the good guys in here versus the bad guys out there. Which, of course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism.

There we have it. Jesus' final instruction to his disciples turned apostles is not to tell the world what is right and wrong. Their job is not to tell nice tidy moral stories like Aesop's Fables. That sentence makes it clear that besides sharing the Good News of Jesus they have the very important duty to forgive. Their job and ours is the work of forgiveness. Would that it could have been an easier assignment, but that is what we are supposed to be up to in the church.

The passing of the peace is a place where we can start. The Peace just before Communion is not supposed to be about a cheery wave of greeting, nor is it supposed to be the time for catching up. While that is what the peace has turned into in many churches; what is really at stake is forgiveness. It is supposed to be about getting right with our neighbor. It is to reflect Jesus' command, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."¹

I challenge you that at the peace today instead of a wave or the peace sign, offer your neighbor forgiveness. Offer them forgiveness for hurts they have may have caused you or another. Offer forgiveness in the name of another that hurt you. Also ask for forgiveness for the sins great and small that you have committed.

In that way we get right with each other and with God. Then we can accept the bread of life with hearts clean and consciences clear. Then the body of Christ will course through our veins without the impediments or barriers that are our sins which keep us far from God and from our fellow creatures who are God's beloved. Then the benefit of Holy Communion is fully available to you, because you are welcoming it in with a grateful heart for the forgiveness and grace God makes available to all of us through our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹ Matthew 5:23-24 NRSV