

19 April 2020, The 2nd Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

John writes: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week...* (20:19). Before today's passage John relates the encounter of Jesus with Mary Magdalene on Easter morning. Therefore, this first appearance to the disciples occurs in the evening of Easter day. Clearly, Mary is the first apostle, the first sent to tell others "the Lord is risen indeed."

In John's Gospel there is no delay between Jesus appearing to the disciples and the giving of the Holy Spirit. As you recall, in Luke the Holy Spirit comes fifty days after Easter (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1ff). It is a tremendous event of God's power resulting in the courageous, public proclamation of the Gospel. We ought not be concerned that Luke and John stress different experiences of the Holy Spirit's coming. There must have been many experiences of the Holy Spirit's presence and gifts—just as since Pentecost there have been countless outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes with power and exuberance. The movement of the Holy Spirit on Easter evening is different. On Pentecost the outward, visible signs of the Holy Spirit are for all to see. Here the Spirit comes as breath in a quiet, hidden-away place. On this occasion the Holy Spirit is given them not for public proclamation but for something else. John writes: *...he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:22b-23).*

In the giving and receiving of the Holy Spirit Jesus forms the Church as a fellowship of forgiveness. However, not merely a community of the forgiven; we are members of a community who share forgiveness. On that evening of his resurrection Jesus makes his followers co-ministers of forgiveness with him. Unlike Paul's teaching concerning the Spirit's gifts in Romans and 1st Corinthians—a some gifts given to some, other gifts to others as the Spirit chooses—here Jesus empowers the Church with a mission of forgiveness that is universal and definitive, to be practiced by all for the good of all. Therefore, we are forgiven forgivers; people who have been and are being forgiven sharing the transforming power of Christ through forgiveness; a dynamic people restless to share the new Life given them in Christ Jesus.

Living life as forgiven forgivers is not something that can be adequately talked about in one brief sermon. However, four brief points to remember. First, sin is retained not just in some lofty, spiritual realm but in our minds, hearts, souls and bodies when we don't forgive. Sins that we cannot forgive bind themselves to us. Just as forgiveness grows us toward holiness, unwillingness or inability to forgive retards our spiritual growth. Think of it this way: just as cancer cells form tumors in the body and kill healthy tissue, withholding forgiveness forms spiritual tumors of resentment which kill spiritual maturity. Forgiveness is the cure.

Second, forgiveness is not a function of our emotions and even our wills. Forgiveness certainly heals our emotions, and we are to be intent on forming our wills according to God's will. Yet our deepest hurts, our most searing resentments, our greatest anger is only healed by God at work in us. Forgiveness is the Spirit's work, a spiritual gift to be asked for, received, practiced and shared. Keep on asking God to teach you how to forgive; ask for, receive and practice the Holy Spirit's power at work in you to forgive; ask for opportunities to practice forgiveness.

Third, the deeper the hurt, the more healing is needed. Most carry emotional and spiritual wounds for which forgiveness is not a "one-off deal." There are likely wounds and resentments that you carry for which forgiveness will be a recurring necessity. Do not be discouraged. All things are possible with God, even being able to forgive what we consider unforgivable.

Lastly, forgiveness is an act of radical freedom. Our souls' Enemy wants us to reject the whole idea of costly forgiveness, wants us bound up by rational excuses to make forgiveness seem impractical, foolish, even cowardly. It takes courage, perseverance, humility and maturity to forgive, but to be free of sin's grasping entanglements, we must forgive. By forgiving we surrender, giving to God that which entangles us and others away from Christ. In being a forgiven forgiver, you are free indeed (John 8:34-36).

Jesus calls us to be forgiven forgivers. The inability to forgive, unwillingness to be taught and learn forgiveness, is spiritual cancer, preventing our growth in holiness. Forgiveness is the Holy Spirit's work in us and through us for our good and that of others. Deep wounds require the deep healing of continuous forgiveness. Forgiveness unbinds us to follow Christ as free men and women, holding the promise of new life to all. Amen.