

A Breath of Fresh Air
John 20:19-31
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There are several sermons to be preached from this text in John but mercifully for all of us, I am only going to preach one of them, which is why the disciples being hidden away, and Jesus mysteriously appearing among them and Thomas and his doubt must be saved for another Easter season. Today, I want to concentrate on the huge statement which comes after Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” for it is at the heart of the Easter experience. In fact, the text before us today is arguably John’s version of the great commission, which is why what comes off in the story as an almost offhanded comment needs to be taken with great seriousness, especially in a world as challenging as the one in which we live. And especially if we believe that the message given to the disciples is the same message given to us today. Jesus is not just making a fashionably late appearance at a Jerusalem house party and offering some one-liners to his adoring fans. This is not an Elvis sighting, as reported in the National Inquirer. In fact, Jesus has risen from the dead, he has conquered death, he has made possible new life. He has found the disciples who have managed to hide from the Jewish leaders and he comes in blows them away with this statement: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Wow! The disciples get to play God.

Well, before we get to the ramifications of that, let's take a look at an interesting aspect of tonight's story, namely Jesus' breath. Now, I don't know about you, but I can't even begin to imagine how awful Jesus' breath must have smelled after three days in the grave. We can only hope for the disciples' sakes that Jesus found a toothbrush somewhere between Easter morning and later in the day when he appeared in that locked room, because it says pretty clearly that "he breathed on them." Whatever may have been the actual state of Jesus' breath, it is clear that far from the foul stench of the grave, what Jesus offers them is the sweetest scent of the garden. You see, John knows the story, the whole story. He knows his Hebrew Scriptures. He knows that Jesus has come to bring life. If you were to flip back to the second chapter of Genesis, you'll see why the action Jesus takes is so significant. It says in Genesis that "the Lord God formed 'adam' (man) from the dust of the ground and breathed (using the same word as in John), breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." Jesus enters a room in Jerusalem, bringing peace, and raises the disciples from the dust of their despair; he breathes into their nostrils the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, and they become living, human beings once again. And now, enlivened by the breath of God, these men and women are immediately charged with taking new life into the world when they are given the power to forgive and retain the sins of others, the power to reconcile people with God and with each other.

It is hard to know quite what to make of this statement. On one hand, the text seems to be saying that Jesus is granting the disciples the power to forgive sins. What they say goes. Their judgment passes for God's, and if you don't get past Peter and James and John, you don't make it to the Kingdom. In other gospel accounts, Jesus gives the disciples the authority and power to heal people and to perform exorcisms, even to walk on water, so we should have no doubt that they have been given this power by one with proper credentials. After all, it came from the mouth of our risen Lord! The disciples have been installed as the watchmen of the Pearly Gates. But at the same time, this doesn't quite jive with our Protestant ideas that only God in Christ can forgive sins, that no other intermediary is required. The power invested in the priests of the Roman Catholic Church to provide absolution for sins was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. What human being can forgive sins? Was not the very reason Christ died and was raised that we are not able to find forgiveness any other way? The unison prayer of confession that we say each week is followed by an Assurance of Pardon, not an absolution conferred upon you by me or any other church figure. Your sins, we believe, are between you and God. And this is not even to mention the likelihood that we will abuse the privilege given to us, wielding that power more like a weapon than a blessing.

So it leaves us with a quandary. How much credence can we place in the Biblical story when it seems to contradict our understanding of the way we are

reconciled with God in Christ? But how can we reject this Biblical witness when the entire biblical history is centered around leaders, whether prophets, kings or martyrs, who are given incredible powers to win battles, to divert rivers, to drive demons into swine, to survive snakebites, to cure the sick, and it now seems, to forgive sins? What is so unbelievable about the disciples being granted such amazing power? Is it because we want to be able to choose which parts of the Bible we believe to be mythical and which parts we believe to be factual? Are we willing to accept the miraculous healing acts of the disciples but reject their authority to forgive and retain sins? Or perhaps is it because we are uncomfortable with the idea that we are to be held accountable, or “judged” by others? Or are we afraid of the awesome power we wield?

Lest we be paralyzed into inaction by that quandary, fearfully isolated in a locked room trying in vain to answer those questions, let us remember the good news of the Gospel found in the fresh air Jesus breathed into his disciples, the breath that brought them back to life. The gift offered by Jesus to the disciples is neither absolute authority over the sins of the body of Christ, nor permission to leave it all for God to deal with. No, the gift Christ gives us is the challenge and responsibility to care for one another precisely where it is the most difficult — in our ability to forgive and retain sins.

We all have stories to tell about when our inability to forgive ended up costing more than the slight itself. And we have all perpetrated our share of sins for

which we need forgiveness. And perhaps we all have had those sins committed against us that we feel to be unforgivable. What each of these has in common with the rest is that they affect our relationships so deeply and so profoundly and so often. Jesus has just endured some of the greatest sin imaginable at the hands of the Romans and his own countrymen, sin which the disciples no doubt found unforgivable. Peter himself has both cut off the ear of the slave of the high priest and denied his acquaintance with Jesus, convicted of his sin when the cock crows. Almost every way we can think about sin and forgiveness is found in the experience of Holy Week and Easter, and yet we come out of it with the gift of a way to cope with what we face every day as disciples of the risen Lord, disciples not really too much unlike those found in a locked room that night.

As so when we set aside false arguments about whether or not the disciples really had the power to forgive or retain sins and we concentrate on the gift breathed upon them by the Jesus, I think there are two ways we can think about the charge given to us by Jesus. The first way to think about this power and its responsibility is to consider it corporately, which is to say collectively, both in the church and in the culture. Like few other news stories I've heard in my life, I remember a scene described by a radio reporter of the events which transpired at a soccer field in Kigali, Rwanda more than fifteen years ago now. There was no soccer game that day, no fans cheering on their team to victory. But there where thousands of people crowded around, climbing trees and shoulders, fences and

hilltops, to catch a glimpse of the action on the field: a firing squad pumping bullets into the bodies of those they held responsible for the massacres in that country several years ago in the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis. I cannot help but think that this is a case of the retention of sins run amok, the abdication of the responsibility that goes with that power, and the failure of reasonable people to stop yet more bloodshed, bloodshed which was reported in the news as being “morally necessary,” according to one Rwandan official, but clearly extrajudicial. I think Jesus would be dismayed to see the gift of retention of sins used in this way. Forgiving sins does not mean we do not execute justice. We can forgive someone but still lock them up for the safety of the citizenry. But let us also not confuse the retention of sins with injustice. We can choose not to forgive and still be a just people. Our power to forgive or retain sins comes with a responsibility to make sure that power is not abused.

The other way to think about the power to forgive and retain sins is in our personal histories — sins we commit against ourselves and others and God, sins others commit against us. I want to show you a few minutes of the end of a movie that captures this beautifully, far more beautifully than if I simply described it to you. This clip comes from a film called “The Priest” from 1994 about two Roman Catholic parish priests, each flawed and compromised in their own way. What you need to know to make sense of this scene is that the younger of the two priests has been caught in a public sexual indiscretion, about which his parishioners have

learned. Many refuse to even stay in the church when they learn he has returned to celebrate the sacrament, and so they storm out in anger, retaining his sins, so to speak. What they don't know is the internal struggle he has had about whether to break to confidentiality of the confessional booth when he learns that a teenaged girl is being repeatedly raped by her father, a sin the girl knows the priest knows, and a sin the priest has retained as his own for his inaction. They also don't know that in a miraculous way, the sexual abuse has been discovered, and the father charged with his crimes. This is what happens next... (Watch final four minutes of the film.)

Sometimes we have every reason in the world not to forgive, but every need in the world to do so, for ourselves, and for others. Earlier, I said the gift Christ gives us is the challenge and responsibility to care for one another precisely where it is the most difficult — in our ability to forgive or retain sins. It is a gift which enables us to live lives beyond the need for vengeance, a gift which enables us to be reconciled with one another when we are estranged. Friends, this is where the rubber meets the resurrection road. This is when we get down and dirty and love people and care for them even when we feel they don't deserve it. This is how we can pursue justice when it seems in short supply. This is who we are as a people of faith. And this is what we believe: that the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings life. This is grace, as pure and simple as the breath of fresh air by which it came. Amen.