

Easter 02 C 2022
April 1124, 2022 :: John 20:19-31
Fr. Jim Cook

“Redeeming Our Wounds.”

I have learned that the command most often repeated in the Bible is “Fear not.” And in today’s gospel reading, no fewer than three times does Jesus say to his disciples, “Peace be with you.” But I will be honest with you, when I first read this passage, I was not feeling very peaceful, and in fact was rather fearful.

For we have just completed the celebration of Easter, the day when Jesus died on the Cross for our sins. And the rest of the New Testament assures us that we have been “put right” with God because of the Cross. But in the first part of today’s gospel reading, when Jesus is issuing his final marching orders for the disciples and the fledgling church, it apparently includes the authority to forgive sins and retain sins.

To be honest, I have a problem with this text. I have a problem with the thought that my sins could still be retained, or held against me, by people no different than I; people subject to temptation, pettiness, even crankiness. Is Jesus serious? Could my

sins actually be “retained” by somebody having a bad day, or someone who just didn’t like me?

But my concern didn’t drive me away from the text, but rather it drove me to dig even deeper into the text. And so I did some reading and studying this week, and have come to the conclusion that there is more going on here than meets the eye.

For one thing, our reading is divided into four parts, but I’ll be dealing only with the first three. The first part of our gospel reading deals with an exchange that takes place between Jesus and the disciples. And since this is Jesus’ final command to his disciples, it must be very important. So, what does it mean when Jesus gives his followers the authority to forgive and/or retain sins?

The first thing to keep in mind is that, by combining this final order with the gift of the Holy Spirit — just as Jesus received at the outset of his ministry — the community is to understand that it is continuing the work that Jesus began in the world.

The second thing we need to keep in mind is very important, and it's a real mind-bender. For in John's gospel, any conversation about "sin" is not a conversation about moral transgressions; it's not a conversation about someone violating this commandment or breaking that law. Rather, when sin is mentioned in John's gospel, it's *always a reference to a theological failing*. Believe it or not (but I hope you'll believe it), whenever sin is mentioned in John's gospel, it's always in the context of someone being blind to the revelation of God in Jesus.

In other words, what the first part of our reading is telling us, is that our calling as Christians, and our mission as a community of faith, is to continue the work of Jesus, which is to bear witness to the love of God. Therefore, in John's gospel, the church's commission is *not* to go about judging people, and deciding who deserves forgiveness of their sins and who doesn't. Rather, it's to do what Jesus did: reveal God to the world, and help people into a relationship with God.

Now that is the meat and substance of today's gospel reading, and it's all contained in the first part of our gospel reading. Parts two and three of our gospel reading are, in some way, lessons

about how we go about fulfilling our commission. Part two of our gospel reading shows us how *not* to do it, and part three shows us how we can do it successfully.

In the second part of our gospel reading, Thomas finally shows up, and the disciples say to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas refuses to believe their claim. It’s this exchange that has apparently earned Thomas the nickname of Doubting Thomas. But to be entirely fair, what the disciples said to Thomas was the *very same thing* that Mary said to the disciples, and the disciples were just as unbelieving as was Thomas. And what Thomas asks for in order to believe — to see the wounds — was exactly what it took in order for the disciples to believe. So, we need to cut Thomas some slack.

The point of all this is, I think, when we are trying to show the world what God has done for us in Jesus, when we are revealing God to the world, when we are professing the love of God for the world, sometimes it takes more than words like “We have seen the Lord!” Some people will not be persuaded by the most articulate of arguments.

Therefore, in the third part of our gospel reading, we are shown how to be effective witnesses for the love of God in Christ. And how do we do that? We give the world the same thing Jesus gave Thomas: we show our wounds to the world.

All of us are wounded. All of our carry the baggage of physical, emotional, or spiritual scars. Sometimes we carry all three. And the fact that we all manage somehow to show up for worship on a fairly regular basis is proof that God has been working on us; that God has been meeting us in our wounded state, and leading us towards wholeness and strength. And even though, for many of us, our wounds are something we'd prefer to keep hidden, our gospel reading suggests that they are the very things that can make us effective disciples of God, and effective witnesses to the love of God.

In his important book entitled "The Wounded Healer," Henri Nouwen once wrote:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The

main question is not “How can we hide our wounds?” so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but “How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?” When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Nouwen continues:

Jesus is God’s wounded healer: through his wounds we are healed. Jesus’ suffering and death brought joy and life. His humiliation brought glory; his rejection brought a community of love. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others.

In today’s gospel reading from John, Jesus gives us our marching orders in somewhat cryptic language: Whatever sins we forgive are forgiven, and whatever sins we retain are retained. But now we know what this really means. When we allow people to see

our woundedness hand in hand with our faith in God; when we allow people to understand that life may have dealt us a miserable hand, and still we profess a God of love, that can speak volumes more than any words we might utter. And by this, wounded though we may be, God redeems our wounds; he takes what was broken and makes it whole, and through us God brings hope to the world.

Amen.