

Disciples- Bearers of Forgiveness

May 1, 2011
John 20: 19 - 23

Reverend Heather Miner

One of my favorite moments of Holy Week was looking out at the group of seventy who were here for Maundy Thursday and realizing that anyone I asked to come up and serve communion would do so without hesitation. During the Palm Sunday children's sermon, I asked two girls to go get a shoe from Trish--they went without hesitation, and she promptly gave her shoe. It was too easy. Then, it occurred to me that I could have asked all the children to do that and they would have, and that all of you would have given up your shoes as well. These may seem like small things, but in a culture where most churches struggle to get 20 on Maundy Thursday or in larger churches where the children are part of a huge children's program distant from the adults, these small things testify to who we are. You are eager to support one another, to love one another, so you made the time for Maundy Thursday. The children revealed on Palm Sunday that they know they can trust you on a level beyond words.

One woman visitor who understands church vitality said of us, "you have a loyal congregation." Through her words and these thoughts, God reminded me that I needed to say thank you. Thank you for being a congregation who sends so many to our men's retreat with Chip this weekend. Thank you for being a congregation who makes time to be here and for creating an environment where all who enter in can trust that they will be met with love. And, if this is your first time here, sign in, let us know you are here, and come join us during coffee hour. Stick around a little while afterwards, you might as well get the full experience!

On the Sunday after Easter, when the world gets back to their business, the Easter and Christmas people return to what they think most important; we who would be Jesus' disciples come together to be commissioned by the risen Lord.

This time of commissioning is found in all 4 gospels. Luke has a story about how Jesus meets the 2 men on the road to Emmaus. Matthew has the risen Jesus meet the disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Mark,

the most suspect of them all, has Jesus arrive and berate the disciples before telling them to go into all the world. And John has a scene that is reminiscent of Pentecost, a scene of the giving of the Holy Spirit. The commission to the disciples in John's gospel, and thus part of our commission, is to forgive. But before you start your litany of who cannot be forgiven and what sins are unforgivable, and before you quote to me the second part of the commission that seems to allow us to judge and choose to not forgive, let's go to the movies. This is the week of the Newport Film Festival!

The 2005 version of Lassie was a surprisingly beautiful remake of a 1940s film in which Lassie, a Scottish Collie, journeys over 1000 miles from Northern Scotland to Yorkshire to return to the family she loves. When she finally makes it she collapses. Half covered by snow, mangy from her travel, she is found and recognized by the markings on her chest and by what was well known to all who knew her, her determination to get home.

The story interweaves Lassie's journey with the story of two children, a girl, Cilla, and boy, Joe. The grandpa who watches over Cilla is a Duke. She is shown living in mansions and eating feasts. Joe comes from a miner's family. The mine has just closed. On his table is a bit of bread. The book is written in 1940, so naturally the dads go off to the war. Cilla loses her home and has to go to a new boarding school where she is known by a number, not a name. And Joe loses his dog as his family sells Lassie to the Duke, so that they might have food. Cilla's grandpa buys Lassie based on her comment of Lassie being a beautiful dog.

The set up would be a recipe for envy, one family having the means to buy, to take, the dog from the other. The duke has the power of privilege and that doesn't change. But Eric Knight, who wrote the book, doesn't turn Lassie into a story of rich against poor. Instead, he finds a way to have both the duke and Joe's Dad stand taller in the end than they did in the beginning.

Knight doesn't ever use the word "forgiveness," but I believe it is forgiveness which enables the ending. At the end of the movie, when the two men meet, they understand that each is doing the best he can. There is no blame. Similarly, the children do not shout out names at one another, but are connected by their mutual appreciation, mutual love, for Lassie.

Forgiveness. Often we use the word "forgiveness" only after blame has been assessed. It is used as a punishing word..."okay I'll forgive you for doing that terrible thing you did to me." Or it is a word that lifts up our own piety as in, "see how good I am to forgive you."

Long ago, a woman who dropped in during the week wanting prayer got caught up in her enthusiasm for the prospect of forgiveness. As I prayed with her, she began to take over the prayer. She forgave her husband for one thing. She forgave her husband for another thing. Once she was done "forgiving," it was not peace that we had found.

In contrast to pious forgiveness driven by duty or pride, I'm intrigued by the peace Knight creates between his lead characters. Where drama could have been created, where hate could have easily surfaced, there is silence, and, in the end, peace and joy. Forgiveness resists blame so we might keep open a door to possibility of love.

Now our scripture begins with exactly the opposite image. It begins with a closed door and the pointed finger of blame. The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, says scripture. No one goes in, no one goes out. This is not a promising beginning. But it is honest. When we lose what we believed in, whether it is a relationship, a job, or an understanding of God, we shut the door to our hearts for a while. And we probably spend some time playing the blame game. Into this locked room enters Jesus.

Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

The disciples look up. There before the grieving stands the wounded Jesus--holding out his hands so that they might see, then turning to show them his side where the sword of the soldier pierced him. Seeing the wounds of the cross, the disciples know it is the same one they followed, who worked miracles, who prayed for them, who forgave them, and who

now stands with them.

In case you missed it on Good Friday, we are confronted with a rather uncomfortable meditation. Instead of our coming to the cross, the crucified one has come to us. Here stands Jesus with the signs of his sacrifice displayed before us. Jesus, not content to be left outside, breaks into the very midst of the locked room, holding out his hands and declaring peace. If the disciples didn't know Jesus, it seems like they'd have had good reason to turn away.

Plenty do. To one who has yet to travel with Jesus, it is like a stranger finding Lassie in the snow. He is simply a mongrel who is about to die. But when it is the boy he loves who sees him, a village's Christmas Eve carols about the one sent from God to bring peace, love, hope, and joy speak not to their dreams but to what has happened, to what is real, to the one who is alive in their midst.

Jesus is the one who made God's love real. Jesus, God's son, has come despite all that would keep him away. He came home from a distant land. His wounds tell of his sacrifice. They are the cost of his forgiving love.

"Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, I am sending you." Then Jesus breathes on the disciples, giving them his ruach, the breath of life, like the breath given to Adam in Genesis 2.

"Receive the Holy Spirit."

The gospel of John once again evokes a creation story. When was the first time? Do you remember the first three words of the gospel? They are "in the beginning."

In the first creation story of Genesis, God created. After God creates humankind, God gives them dominion over all the living things on the earth. It is a like movement here.

Mary, tell my brothers that I go to my Father and your Father, my God and your God."

These are the words quoted at Sunrise this Easter. In this scene Mary grieves and Jesus comes behind her. Supposing him to be a gardener, she asks where he has taken her Lord. The "gardener" replies, "Mary." She turns around and shouts "Rabbouni!"

And Jesus says to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." It is made plain

that the point of Jesus' journey was not to come home to us, but to bring us home to God.

Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

When the crucified Christ arrives in that locked room, he passes his power to his brothers: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In the gospel of John the word "sin" is saved for the state of those who choose to remain blind to who he is. This is the first time the word forgive is used in the gospel. The Greek word translated as forgive is "to send away, to let go". The disciples are given the power to send away that which keeps us from seeing Jesus as he is, the crucified one standing before us, who opens the way to God becoming "Our Father!"

If we choose a way other than the crucified Christ, the way to the Father is blocked by our sin.

I know some of us would like to enter into an argument about who God lets into heaven about now. But that's not the point.

The question, for us who would be his disciples, is do we dare see Jesus as he is? Do we dare look at the one who was crucified? Do we dare believe that it was the only way...the full giving up of all human power...the surrender to the forces of evil in this world, some of which are in us...the nails in the hands, the piercing of his side...this was the only way to make us let go...let go of the belief that we can make it all right in our life time on our own, let go of the belief that we can be perfect and good and holy onto ourselves, let go of the anger that screams at God: why do you allow all of this?

Forgiveness resists blame and opens a door to the possibility of love. It is Christ crucified that the disciples must bring into the world: he who came not to condemn the world, but who came that the world might be saved. He stands in the locked spaces of our soul...beckoning them to open.

Dare to see Jesus as he is...broken for you.

Anthony Robinson, writing on the same text, imagines God asking a man on judgment day who looked way too clean, way too pristine...

"Where are your wounds? Was there nothing to fight

for down there?"

As the Father sent me, so I send you.

Brothers and sisters of Christ, if you take this call of discipleship seriously, there will be times when you are broken, there will be times when you are pierced, and there will be times when you feel like you've given everything and more. But there are so many souls who live in fear and guilt and shame. There are so many who are far from God's love, who can only scream about what isn't right in their lives and in the world. And there are so many who are trying to do it all by themselves and not getting very far. And they are worth fighting for.

Now remember to begin at the beginning...it is hard to understand a crucified Christ before you've met Jesus. But remember it is a journey, and a journey of 1000 miles is gladly made for one you love.

John 20: 19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, 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."