

EASTER SUNDAY 02 – C

”The Great Commission”

(Acts 5:12-16; Psalm 118; Rev 1:9-13, 17-19; John 20:19-31)

What is God’s second name? The answer has to be forgiveness!

Forgiveness is the new life of Easter

The struggle to forgive those who hurt us is a universal human struggle. When I mentioned to a friend that I thought she needed to forgive her father the abuse he had inflicted upon her, she looked hard at me and exclaimed, “Forgiveness is a million miles away.”

A group of psychologists working in a federal penitentiary once handed out a letter from a young girl to her dad in prison. To this day I do not know what their purpose was in doing so as they never had time to comment on it. The letter itself, however, was very vindictive, bitter, full of name-calling and unforgiving. If those professionals thought this letter was an example of how to handle abuse, I am afraid for this girl – she will spend the rest of her life carrying anger and hatred towards her father.

The gospel for this second Sunday of Easter shows us a whole new way of dealing with our anger, hurt and resentment – forgiveness. It is no accident that the account begins with “the first day of the week” because what is happening here is a new creation. This reminds me of a touching scene in the movie by Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ*, where Jesus meets his mother on the way to his crucifixion. He is bloody, exhausted, half-dead, yet he looks up at Mary his mother and says simply to her, “Behold, I am making all things new.” This man, about to be executed, is breaking the cycle of violence that has plagued our world since time immemorial. He freely submitted himself to the full fury of the evil one to the point of death to overcome the power of evil, death and unforgiveness through his resurrection to a new, divine and eternal life that he shares with us. Forgiveness is the new life of Easter.

Real sin for John is the failure to recognize Jesus as Messiah and Savior. To teach unforgiveness as some do today is a failure to recognize Jesus as forgiveness! Jesus overcomes the disciples’ fear, the resistance of locked doors, and appears to them with no sign of anger or revenge: only peace and joy. That is the power of true forgiveness, to let go of anger and resentment. That is the power of this new creation.

Jesus then mandates them to forgive as he did, as the Father sent him. He empowers them to do so by breathing into them the Spirit of forgiveness. Breathe (*emphysao*) occurs only here in the NT, and evokes the description of God breathing life into the first human being – thus, a new, second creation. Those who believe in Jesus receive new life as children of God. That new life, this tremendous new vitality, is the ability to forgive, and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains that new life.

An example of this kind of forgiveness is Albert who started working the Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous while at a rehabilitation center. His Step 6 & 7 was an attempt to forgive his alcoholic abusive mother the hurt she inflicted upon him. Here is part of his letter to his mother:

“Mom, I want to be free of all this anger and resentment. I need to know if you love me. You must tell me. I must hear it. I forgive you for all that you put me through; for all the pain that you intentionally caused me, for all the hurtful things you said and did. I shall never know why you did them but as a child and a human being I didn’t deserve it. By sharing more of my story with people and circles I am gaining back my childhood kid and know it was not his fault. The hold my pain and hurt has on me lessens the more I talk and share it. Mom, I forgive you. I wish I had more answers but I won’t force you to talk. I hope you can heal too. Deal with your demons. As human beings shame kills us spiritually and emotionally. I will pray for you. I don’t blame you. With love, your son, Albert.

The incident of doubting Thomas adds a deeper, healing dimension to this new creation brought about by Jesus. Those who have suffered trauma from earlier abuse or violence usually block out such painful memories, They are afraid to remember, to go back, to feel the pain, so they avoid it, often through the abuse of alcohol, drugs, sex, or some other activity that invariably leads to an addiction. A simple definition of addiction is the attempt to avoid legitimate suffering, to medicate one’s pain.

The invitation of Jesus to Thomas to put his finger in his side, to doubt no more but to believe, is an invitation for all victims of sexual abuse especially to go on a healing journey with Jesus. Many often ask, “Where was God when this abuse happened to me?” Well, the answer is in the passion of Christ. Whatever happened to them, happened to Jesus. He was probably sexually abused by the soldiers himself during his passion. The point is that Jesus suffered all that we suffered, but look at how he handled his pain – absolute total forgiveness on the Cross - and only peace and joy when he appeared to his disciples in the upper room. His invitation to us is to go back, re-live the incidents of abuse; re-member, feel the feelings, share the feelings and eventually give them back to those who hurt us, with love. And in the process, Jesus will touch each one of our wounds and heal them. He will help us forgive those who hurt us, take the pain away, and restore our innocence and dignity, so that we too will be able to feel only peace and joy, even though we still have the memories. These memories will now become our sacred wounds. We will be like Jesus, still bearing the scars, but now healed and at peace, because of him, and because we did with our hurt what he did with his, forgive. When we act like God, we get to feel like God, and that is the source of our peace and joy.

The other readings for today add a six-pack of ingredients for the life of the Church in this new creation: belief; gathering; healing; kingdom; persecution and enduring perseverance. In the first reading it all starts with faith, the faith of Thomas – “My Lord and my God.” It then moves on to gathering. The early believers gathered in Solomon’s Portico. To be a believer, a follower of Jesus, is to be Church, to be a gathering, to come together especially on the Lord’s day around the Word of God to praise, worship and

break bread together. This is what many do not understand – there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We are the Body of Christ, meant to come together in worship and praise.

The first reading also mentions healing. Healing happens to us when we gather. It may not be as dramatic as the physical healings that happened when Peter's shadow fell on the sick as he passed by, but it is impossible for us not to experience some healing when we gather to pray, praise, worship, proclaim God's word, and reach out to one another in peace and love. Hans Urs von Balthasar points out that the Apostles do not make a fuss about the miracles that they do, and Paul only mentions in passing the ones he performed. Far more important to him is the spiritual vitality of the Word of God proclaimed by the Church.

The reading from Revelation adds three other ingredients: persecution, kingdom and patient endurance. What this new creation is all about essentially is the establishment of the kingdom of God among and within us, right here and now. The peace and joy that filled the room when Jesus appeared to the disciples is precisely an experience of that kingdom, which at one point in the scriptures Jesus described as the peace, joy and justice of the Holy Spirit.

That deep peace and joy is our legacy, our birth-right in this new kingdom, even if there will be persecution from those who do not understand, who want to maintain the status quo, who resist change and newness, who are stuck in anger and resentment, guilt and fear, sadness and self-pity. We are counseled to be patient and to endure this lack of acceptance – that is part of life in this new creation that Jesus has brought about, the reign of God within and among us. Despite persecution, and through patient endurance in the Spirit, the believer will prevail and enjoy new life within the Kingdom of God, for the new life of Easter is forgiveness, and forgiveness is now possible through him.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate is the primary sacrament of forgiveness, making present that love of God for all humanity shown by Jesus on the cross. His body is broken especially to strengthen believers; his blood is poured out for all, inviting all humanity to believe and be healed. As we proclaim his Word and receive his Body and Blood, we are transformed into that new creation and empowered to go out and renew the earth.

So remember - forgiveness is the new life of Easter. Recognize Jesus as forgiveness, and follow him in a life of Spirit-empowered forgiveness that is the new life of Easter.