

“Bringing Belief to Life”
Easter 2C – April 24, 2022
Dorothy Whiston at New Song Episcopal Church

For some years I had the privilege of working with the Alternatives to Violence Project in Iowa prisons. AVP was started by residents of Sing Sing prison in New York in the 1970’s with the help of some local Quaker volunteers they’d asked to help them address the increasing violence they were experiencing in prison. The intensive 3-day workshops are co-led by a team of inside and outside volunteers and are meant to develop self-awareness, trust, communication, and problem-solving skills.

Most of the time is spent doing various exercises, some serious and some silly, and then processing what people experienced and learned in group discussions. It’s all about learning by doing – not only the underpinning concepts, but also the lived reality of self-awareness, trust, communication, and problem-solving.

One trust exercise we sometimes did involved pairs of people taking turns wearing a blindfold and then being navigated around the room by voiced instructions from their partner. Some blindfolded people stepped out very bravely and didn’t seem much bothered when they bumped into things. Others, like me, were more timid. And some navigators were quite careful, while others were pretty cavalier, even mischievous.

I particularly remember one blindfolded man who simply wouldn’t move, no matter how careful and encouraging his navigator’s instructions were. He maybe took 5 baby steps the entire time. When we were sharing our experiences afterwards, he simply shook his head and declared emphatically to the group, “Seeing is believing, man!”

Now this fellow had no reservations about the reality of the floor beneath his feet and he probably had a pretty good conception in his mind of what the room looked like, even where the obstacles were. But without being able to physically see what was there, he wasn’t about to step out and entrust himself to it. Seeing is believing!

We often sort of demean Thomas’s behavior in the story we heard this morning, calling him “doubting Thomas.” But, in fact, Thomas was only insisting on what all the other disciples had experienced – a chance to see for himself the wounded presence of the risen Christ.

Interestingly, I think the key here is the phrase “wounded presence” more than “risen Christ.” Thomas had recently been with Jesus when he raised Lazarus from the dead and he’d heard Jesus say repeatedly that he, himself, would rise from the dead. So the *risen* part was likely not the stumbling block we often assume it was, and is for many of us today.

What the disciples likely had the most trouble with were the wounds that showed in no uncertain terms the ignominious defeat Jesus had suffered. He didn’t just die. He was tortured and executed, bringing all their grand plans for inaugurating the kingdom of God to a screeching, crashing halt. What they couldn’t believe – either intellectually or in terms of entrusting themselves to it – was that the Son of the one true God could go down in crushing defeat, which Jesus most certainly had. How was this mess ever going to redeem the world, as God’s messiah was meant to do?

The short, though not simple, answer is through the power of self-giving Love. It’s all about the full revelation of the embodied, living, self-giving love of the risen Christ eternally at work in the world. The grand mystery of the spiritual transformation of humankind through the

evolution of our consciousness and capacity to love, rather than merely a repayment of some debt owed to God for our sins.

The original – or origin of -- sin arose almost as a fluke of evolution, as our prototypes Adam and Eve struggled to come to terms with our utter human contingency. We humans didn't – and don't – much like that we don't create ourselves and so are entirely dependent on our Creator. And we couldn't quite get our heads around the reality that God created us in self-giving love, from love, and for love.

Not only is that a lot for a primitive, evolving brain to comprehend, it's one of those things you can really only understand through lived experience. And so the snake of our fear and insecurity insinuated itself, derailing our experience of God's utterly self-giving love. And the sin of the world – our refusal to be loved into fullness of life by God and so to love our neighbors as ourselves -- came into being.

And still, God loved and loves us! And is forever, always cultivating a truly beloved, life-giving human community among us. Going so far, even, as to send his own son to absorb and transform the sin of the world, which we inflict in untold individual and collective destructive attitudes and behaviors. In Jesus's life, death and resurrection we witness the power and the glory, and yes, the suffering -- but ultimately the power and glory -- of sacrificial love. A power and glory that doesn't avoid the sin of the world but takes it on directly in divine freedom and total forgiveness.

Forgiveness, like love, is one of those things you can only really comprehend through the lived experience of forgiving or of being forgiven. And, that my friends, is heaven! Heaven, eternal life, abundant life in God truly is a participatory sport. Thinking about it – even believing in it in primarily an intellectual sense -- just doesn't cut it. It doesn't make it real. It doesn't bring it to life.

And so Jesus sends out his disciples to do the nitty gritty, hard work of forgiving sins, empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Which leads me to consider the line in today's gospel that has always confounded me, and if I'm honest, has pretty much bugged me. And a lot of other Christians as well, I think.

Why in the world would Jesus tell his disciples they were to choose whether or not to forgive or retain people's sins? Did Jesus not come to "take away the sin of the world" – all the sin, to the very core? And was this not accomplished for all people and for all time in his life, death, and resurrection? Wouldn't these few words pretty much undo the whole project? They simply make no sense!

Thankfully, the renowned biblical scholar, feminist theologian, and Catholic sister Sandra Schneiders sheds some light on this. I chanced upon one of her articles ("The Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel") while preparing today's sermon. And will gratefully admit to sharing several of her ideas here, including the assertion I'm about to outline.

In a nutshell, Schneiders maintains that biblical scholars have traditionally mis-translated Jesus's commission to his disciples in this passage. She says the words "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" simply do not accurately reflect the actual Greek words and syntax of the text, nor the theology of John, nor his writing style. Or for that matter, Christian theology more broadly.

First off, Schneiders notes that Jesus bestows God's peace and Holy Spirit on the *disciples* who were locked up in that room, rather than just the apostles. In John's gospel, the term disciples refers to a very inclusive group of men and women, landed and poor, Jews, Samaritans and others. In other words, the whole human family. We're all meant to get involved. And what is it that we're to do?

Schneiders maintains that Jesus is giving us a two-fold commission that will continue to embody Christ life in human history. First, we are indeed to go out and forgive sins. As I noted earlier, you really only come to believe in the transformative power of forgiveness – to entrust yourself to it – once you've directly experienced it. Which the disciples did when Jesus returned to them, still wounded, but with peace in his heart and on his lips. Jesus's forgiveness was always given person-to-person, so his followers are to go out and do the same. So far, so good.

However, Schneiders says, they're not invited in this passage to retain people's sins should we choose to do so. In fact, the word "sins" doesn't even appear in the second half of that sentence in the Greek. And the word "retain" is also a poor translation. What Schneiders maintains it really says – and which makes a lot more sense to me -- is that the disciples are to forgive people's sins and then to embrace, to hold fast to those very people.

Quite simply, we're to become steadfast community with one another no matter the past hurts and harms among us. This is actually a commission of the founding of the church, the universal beloved community rooted in both forgiveness – letting go of past harm -- and reconciliation – faithfully holding together in relationship even when we might rather turn away or exclude because of those past hurts.

So, again, a more accurate reading of "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" is likely "Of whomever you forgive the sins, they are forgiven to them; whomever you embrace, they are held fast. Again – whoever's sins you forgive are forgiven them and whoever you embrace are held fast.

Schneiders acknowledges that although the sacrament of confession didn't become vested in the clergy until centuries later, she fears scholars' poor interpretation of this scripture might also reflect the clericalism the church gradually came to rely on. But she insists this passage – and the church – is not about an elite, more holy group bestowing God's forgiveness – or not – on the rest of us. It is about the mutually beloved community made possible among people when we experience and actively entrust ourselves to the self-giving, forgiving Love of God, present in all creation, embodied in Christ, and bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit.

This is written so that you might come to believe – to experience – that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. Alleluia! Amen.