

Pentecost: The Power to Forgive

The Feast of Pentecost, May 31, 2020

In the short passage we just heard read, John gives us his version of Pentecost and the Commissioning (or 'Sending Forth') of the disciples on their divine mission. And John's version is a strange one. Because for John, these two great events happen together. [In fact, for John, the *Resurrected* (20:14) and *Ascending* (20:17) Jesus is, *in the same moment*, *Sending the Holy Spirit* into his disciples (20:22); and *Sending them forth* on their divine mission (20:23). And, for John, they *all* happens on Easter.]

This naturally boggles our minds, until we recognize that, for John, time has "stopped." Just like time "stops" for us when we're deeply engaged in doing something — or being with someone — we love. When that happens, we're somehow taken to "another place," where hours can pass in a moment. In this morning's text, John is writing from that "other place." He's not concerned with making a neat historical timeline of what happened 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th (so we can store away the sequence in our mental "file cabinet.") Matthew, Mark, and Luke had already done that. Instead, John wants to show us what it's like when these great events become interconnected and real for us within our own lived experience. For John, Pentecost & Mission are so **completely intertwined** with one another that they can't be separated out. For Pentecost is the *power to do* what Jesus, in the Commissioning, *sends* his disciples *to do*.

The other gospel writers see this same crucial connection between having *the power to do* and actually **doing** it — they just speak of it differently. Matthew speaks of it in terms of the empowering presence of Jesus in our doing what we're commissioned to do — "*Behold, I am with you always, till the end of time.*" Mark speaks of it in terms of our actions becoming so full of power that they become spiritual signs — like touching and healing the sick. Luke speaks of it in terms of our need to first "*get dressed*" before we "*go out*" to do good — "*Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*"

John's Pentecost is much simpler than the version we heard from the *Acts of the Apostles* (in our first reading). For John, it's a very private affair, between Jesus and his disciples. There is no crowd gathered 'round — no tongues of fire descending, no sermon by Peter. There is only Jesus, *breathing* on them, and saying "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*"

John's Commissioning is *also* much simpler than the versions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, there is no mention of going out to preach, teach, baptize, and disciple others. There are only these perplexing words of Jesus: "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit.... If you forgive the sins of any, they have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.*"

We probably can easily receive the part of this Commissioning that says, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit....*" (For throughout both testaments we hear of the need for spiritual power if we seek to do spiritual things.) But the part of what Jesus commissions us to actually *go out and do* — forgiving or retaining sins — is very perplexing indeed. To be frank: what kind of Commission is *that* for us? Hasn't John read the Anglican Communion's "*5 Marks of Mission*"? Why doesn't he mention going out & proclaiming the Good News; or teaching, baptizing, and nurturing believers; or responding to human need with loving service; or working to transform unjust structures in society; challenging violence of all kinds; pursuing peace & reconciliation; or striving to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain & renew the life of the earth? I can't say for sure whether St. John has read our "5 Marks" or not. But I'm quite sure that he would agree with all of the good actions they contain (which are rooted in serious reflection on the scriptures in the context of our world.) It's just that John is speaking here from a very different *angle* — a different *vantage point* — on what Jesus commissions his disciples to do. It's more 'foundational' than 'strategic.' So let's take a closer look at the more perplexing part of what he hears Jesus saying — "*If you forgive the sins of any, they have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.*"

The **pattern** in these phrases is an ancient one that Jesus often used — it's a pairing of **opposites** — which highlights the need to **choose** between them. It's much like the Two Ways: **1. There is a way that leads to life. 2. There is a way that leads to death. 3. Choose life.** It's much like Jesus' teachings about young children: **1. Look at this child, who trusts. 2. Look at yourselves, who won't. 3. Be like the child, instead of making the child be like you.** Opposites **attract** our minds, probably because we're always seeking to resolve the tension between our desires & the obstacles that oppose their fulfillment. So this pattern of speech (which pairs opposites together) tends to get our attention.

Jesus **first** says to the disciples: "If you **forgive** the sins of any, they have been forgiven them." Then he says it's **opposite**: "If you **retain** the sins of any, they have been retained." The choice between the one or the other — which is up to the disciples to make — is only implied. But which choice Jesus sees as **best** is already very clear to the disciples. At this point in their relationship with him, they know that the Lamb of God — sent to "take away the sins of the world" — is not advising them to "keep sin growing" by refusing to forgive those who sin against them. They know from experience that Jesus sees forgiving as the best choice. And now they're learning that as the Father sent him, he is sending them, with the same power & mission. For John, the disciples continuing to make this choice is the key to the Commissioning. Because it's from this deepest choice (to either "forgive" or "retain" sins against them) that either "good" works or "bad" works flow.

The original Greek words that John uses for "forgiving" and "retaining" sins make the nature of this fundamental choice more clear. The word he uses for "**forgive**" means "let go of", "release", "let loose", "set free." And the word he uses for "**retain**" means "hold on to", "have power over", "get the better of", "seize", "conquer" and "possess." So the more lengthy message packed into these two short phrases is something like —

"When people sin against you (*as, inevitably, they will*), don't hold on to it (*to get the better of them*), don't carry it within you (*or it will get the better of you*). Instead, release it, and them, from the grip of your desire to punish them and avenge yourself. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples. If instead, you choose to tighten your grip, then it doesn't matter how much you teach & preach, how many you baptize, or how far throughout the world you travel on your mission. Because my Spirit will not be in it."

Forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting. It's just not remembering maliciously, which is all too easy to do. We've all had the experience of "**retaining**" or "**holding on**" to the sins of others — when we feel they were mean, hurtful, or thoughtless toward us — when we feel they didn't do for us what they should have — or that they just haven't done *enough* for us. What they did or didn't do might have been a true injustice. Or it might have been something we misunderstood as evil, when it actually wasn't. But whether real or imagined, we *feel* the offense. And once we do, a very harmful desire can easily arise. The desire to "**cling**" to it — to "*not let them off the hook*" for it — to hold them in the "vice" of our resentment and "*make them pay*" until we're satisfied. It's a desire which persuades us that — if we hold on to them tightly and refuse to let them go — we will somehow get the justice we believe we're due.

Some of us are inclined to cope with this resentful desire by hiding it beneath a *strained civility*. And that can sometimes help in the short term. But the desire is still there within us, and we and those around us can still perceive it and be affected by its tension. Others of us are inclined to cope by venting our resentments & hostilities. And that can also sometimes help in the short term to make us feel freer & stronger. But, again, the harmful desire is still there, still affecting us & those around us. The challenge with either hiding or venting our resentments is that these short term solutions can become quite addictive. And as long term solutions they're very destructive for us & for others. And so, as Jesus points out in John's gospel, they're **not the best** frames of mind to go out and "*spread the good news*" in. They make the message more spiritually repellent than attractive.

Now that's all well & good. But **how** do we "*let go*" of the sins of others — or of *our own* sins for that matter? How do we *not "hold on"* to them when that seems like all we want to do?

"Just... 'let it go' " is a very popular platitude. But often, the people who tell us to just do that — if you ask them — don't really know how it's done. They just want you to somehow do it and be done with it. But, at least in my experience, it's actually not that easy to do. *Burying* our resentments — or actually getting *revenge* (*overtly or covertly, on ourselves or others or both*) — those are fairly easy things to do. But truly letting go of them — letting them actually dissolve into nothing — is not that easy at all. There's no set of quick steps for that, at least not in the Christian sense of "letting go.". Because for us, *"letting go"* & *"forgiving"* are the very same thing. And it takes power to do that — a power that we say is *"higher"* than the power of our own little egos (*or our own 'big' egos, whichever the case may be*). In our tradition, we say that forgiving is not just a matter of our own will power, but of the blending of our wills with the divine will. It's more a matter of *"letting go and letting God"* (another platitude, but a better one.) Someone once put it like this:

As long as we walk on earthly roads, forgiving, though always necessary, must be understood as being far beyond our reach... Only God, by making us aware of the fact that we cannot be forgiving, makes us forgiving. We only find the victory of forgiveness through the admission of its defeat.

(adapted from the late Francois Varillon's writings on humility)

So let's be wise about forgiveness. Let's not imagine that it's *"a piece of cake."* If forgiveness is something we find we can easily do *"on our own steam,"* then it's something other than forgiveness.

And let's also not go to the other extreme — and *"beat ourselves up"* for how unforgiving we are. For it's that very awareness of being unable to forgive that leads us to recognize our need for the loving power of Christ's Spirit, and to the grace to receive & use & enjoy it in our lives.

For Jesus in John's gospel, as bold as it may sound, the power of Pentecost is primarily the power to forgive. The power that releases us from *"holding on"* to things that harm us, and that flows through our thoughts, words, and deeds in ways that help us, and all those our lives affect. And so, the power to forgive is also the power behind our mission, behind Christ's mission for us, in our short time on this earth.

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, unite us with Christ and with the Father, so that our wills incline us to make wise choices, and our desires, thoughts, words, and deeds become increasingly free of resentments and increasingly full of your grace.

We pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Fr. Rishi Sativihari
Priest in residence (retired)
St. John in the Wilderness
Brights Grove, Ontario

P.S. A brief note on different catholic interpretations of John 20:23

Anglicans and Roman Catholics have much in common. But good friends also disagree. The view of this verse as instituting a sacramental power to retain sins within a penitent that is possessed by Roman Catholic priests, dates back to the 16th century (and the Council of Trent). Of course, not all Roman Catholics agree with this view. Some scholars suggest that institutionalizing this verse in this way was a defensive move in response to the challenges of Protestant Reformers such as Luther and Calvin. In contrast, the view of John 20:23 presented here is that, in Christ, we all have the power to forgive sins, and that the power to retain sins is a power of our own that is not in harmony with the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. This is my own perspective, and not an official view of the Anglican Church.