

Receive and Give Forgiveness

Second Sunday of Easter/C

Mercy Sunday

April 3, 2016 10:45 AM Acts 5:12-16; Rev 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19; **Jn 20:19-31** (Who is going to make the first move to bring about peace and reconciliation, in our world, in our families, in our personal lives?)

One aspect of all **the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection** that connect them all is that **there is nothing that we would expect**. Life as it had been has been radically changed and now **something else has begun**. There is continuity in the sense that Jesus is there and he has his wounds. It's the same Jesus who died on the cross and yet he is not recognizable in many cases, and in this case his behavior is not what one might expect. Ordinarily, after all the drama of Good Friday a reunion with his not-so-good friends, not-so-loyal friends, not-so-faithful friends might have expressed at least disappointment, as he was capable of doing.

But no, in this very telling moment, **Jesus returns to his favorite theme, which is forgiveness**. That is a theme he goes back to over and over again more than any other in the New Testament. **“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive will be forgiven, and whose sins you retain will be retained.”** This is not a matter of some sort of juridical authority. It has often been interpreted that way, but it isn't fundamentally. **Fundamentally it is enabling**. Too often people say, “I can't forgive. I am too wounded. I am too hurt. I am too overwhelmed by what she did” or “what he did, and I thought we were friends,” or “and I've been such a good mother,” and so on. You can fill in the blanks.

Well, indeed, the human psyche is fragile, and we all can be overwhelmed by injuries. We can be overwhelmed by even slights and insults from the right person. That is why we need and God gives us the Holy Spirit, which is God's own love in action, God's own energy. So it's true, **we cannot forgive, but God can forgive in us and through us**. And that's the whole idea of the resurrection of Christ. **He now brings us into union with him and shares his inner power, which is the Holy Spirit**. This substantially changes our being, and this is clearly the message of every Eucharist. Jesus' death is meant to transform his disciples, including of course us. His blood was poured out for them and for us and for many we don't even know for the forgiveness of sins. And that has two sides: **that we can be forgiving—that's the forgiveness of sins, and that we will be forgiven. They go together**; in fact, they cannot be separated. And this is **another theme Jesus repeats over and over again**.

Meanwhile it is difficult to exaggerate the degree to which **all human history is really a tale of retaliation**—retaliation, one of the greatest specters in human history. On a personal level this may amount to holding perpetual grievances that eat away at one's inner peace. On a family level it may involve broken relationships and estrangement, even among many generations. On a national level or ethnic level it may amount to ongoing acts of vengeance that simply breed more acts of vengeance. We can see this right now in the so-called “war on terror.” Terrorists, after all, rightly or wrongly—rightly or wrongly—are convinced that they or their people have been wronged, betrayed, or cheated. Their acts of terror are forms of **payback**. Now the innocent victims of this payback then launch **counterattacks**: missiles, drones, and so on, which just escalate the terrorism making more terrorists. **Is this going to work?** How can anyone think it will? **Each side thinks it can win, but at best it can only wear out the other one momentarily, and I mean momentarily**. The wars and the cleansings that we saw in Yugoslavia

in the 90s were really avenging grievances hundreds of years old that not one person actually experienced, but they got the memory of them from their parents and grandparents and great grandparents and great-great-grandparents, as we have that charming way of passing on our grievances generation after generation. **War, violence, power, and force cannot settle or heal all the offended feelings in the human race.**

This is precisely why **Jesus** offered himself in atonement. He **offered himself to atone for all offenses. Why is that not enough?** That is a very important question for every believer to ask. Why is that not enough that the son of God, the Word made flesh, entered the world and offered his life in atonement, and yet we still want something more? Why and what more?

Although **Jesus** always took the initiative in offering forgiveness, he **always also insisted that the love of God is unconditional, and yet he did put a condition on receiving mercy—he did.** There is a condition on receiving mercy, and that condition is **that you are willing to pass it on, that as you receive you also give.** I've never counted how many times in the New Testament mercy is used or referred to or this teaching is given in some form, but they are many. And central to prayer itself, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” which is a prayer against ourselves if we are not willing to forgive.** We are praying not to be forgiven if we are not willing to forgive. That's the very meaning of that prayer. It can't escape us if we look at it. Again, in Luke it says: **“If you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.”** That's one case where you can take the Bible literally. There aren't many, but this is one.

The question whether there is anyone eternally lost, which is a theological question raised by St. Pope John Paul II for example, especially in reference to today, Mercy Sunday, is an important question. **Is anyone eternally lost? We don't know.** But it does not revolve around whether God can or will forgive every kind of sin. That's not a question. **We know God does and wills to forgive every sin. But the question revolves around whether we are willing to receive the forgiveness by passing it on.** We know there are those who at the present time don't and won't and refuse to. **Does that change before the hour of their death or past the hour of their death? This we do not know. This is why we have Mercy Sunday to pray for that.** Again, with the Holy Spirit we are able, but are we willing? The Holy Spirit is not a spirit of force. **The Holy Spirit is a spirit of invitation.**

Finally, it's important to note that **mercy toward others and sorrow, true sorrow for any harm we have done to someone else, is really the same thing.** It is divine charity, divine love infused into our souls as grace, as gift. It's the same thing. We cannot feel sorrow without feeling mercy. We cannot experience mercy without feeling sorrow. **Divine love or charity melts hearts, dissolves boundaries, and restores and heals relationships.** The death and resurrection of Christ, as we see from today's gospel, is really the beginning of **a mission for Jesus' disciples.** And it's a daunting mission, but it is a possible mission, namely, **to bring about peace and reconciliation on this planet now in the present age,** not in some future age—in the present age. That's the mission. And clearly the gospel is asking us: **Who is going to make the first move, in our world, in our families, in our personal lives?** Who is going to make the first move? **Who can really honestly say, “There's nothing I can do”?**