

Freed from our sins
Rev.1: 4-8; John 20:19-31

My younger brother is the Episcopal Bishop of Maryland. I was impressed by one of the things that were said to him so many years ago when he was ordained. As a priest he was told that if he forgave the sins of anyone they would be forgiven and if he retained their sins they would be retained. At the time I was kneeling on the flagstones in the chancel of his church and was somewhat pre-occupied with my knees. Afterward I started to think about it. At the time I had been ordained for about 9 years in the United Church of Christ and I considered whether my brother had received authority, which I had somehow missed. Realizing that our tradition speaks of the “priesthood of all believers” I wondered if all of us, have this authority to forgive sins.

The words addressed to Bob come, of course, from this morning’s lesson in John. ‘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.”’ This was a part of Jesus’ bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. There was no mention of any separate priesthood or class of disciples, only that those who had received the Spirit of Peace from Jesus were invited to exercise this authority and responsibility.

When you think of it this is a rather peculiar beginning of a post resurrection commissioning. Jesus did not start by explaining anything about what had so dramatically happened to him the past few days. You know how it is with most of us, something terrifying or wonderful happens and we

tell everyone we meet. Whether it is a fender-bender, or child accepted for a special scholarship, or a new job, we tell people about it. Jesus was tortured to death, died, and was buried, and now has returned to life in some new and more glorious way and the first thing he tells his friends is: “Anyone you forgive will be forgiven and if you do not forgive them they wont be forgiven.”

Can you even imagine how they felt and reacted? They were just starting to come to grips with the fact that some of their number had met the risen Lord, and then he appears with them inside this locked room. He greets them with a friendly “shalom” and tells them that just as the Father has sent him, so he sends them to spread forgiveness and accountability. Talk about cutting right to the chase!

A couple of thoughts about this matter of forgiveness come to me. First, it is important that when a great injustice has been done and a tragedy suffered, that forgiveness be among the first steps to recovery of health and meaningful life. The Disciples have to learn how to forgive if they are not to become enmeshed in the ultimately futile round of seeking or wishing for revenge on those who so cruelly killed their friend. They need to learn how to forgive themselves for somehow missing the point of Jesus’ teaching and being so surprised by the events of that past week. They even have to forgive themselves for running away, denying their friend, hiding out, even doubting the miracle they have just witnessed.

So often in the years I was active in AlAnon Family Groups I talked with folks who had finally come to grips with the nature of the illness that afflicted their spouse, or child, or parent, and felt so guilty about all the foolish, hostile, and counterproductive things they had done in reaction that

they were unable to get on with their lives. The alcoholic might have forgiven them, they might even believe that their God had forgiven them, but they just could not forgive themselves. Sometimes when I pointed out how silly it seems to have higher standards than God, they would smile and start the process of recovery.

So, forgiveness is a key matter for the disciples if they are to get on with their witness. It is still a key part of our gospel message. So often in the sordid history of the Christian Church we have seen “Christians” being unforgiving toward: heretics, persons of other faiths, people with differing ethnic or racial or sexual characteristics. It has made for some pretty shameful stuff from the Crusades, to the Inquisition, to the Salem witch trials, to the kind of excommunication and shunning which sometimes characterizes modern churches who have a belief in their own exclusive hold on “the Truth”.

The implications of the “Priesthood of all believers” go beyond the need to be forgiving toward our personal enemies and those whose strangeness threatens us. You and I are called to take seriously our neighbors’ faults and failures and to be positively involved in seeking reconciliation. We are indeed to be instruments of God’s Peace. If we believe that God prefers to forgive us and turn us toward a better way of life, we have a responsibility toward our neighbors to mediate that forgiveness.

We cannot do it with a kind of “*anything goes*” indulgent attitude. We have to take sin and evil seriously but we do well to remember that most of what God is able to do in this world is done through human agency and if we do not become agents of reconciliation, persons who offer forgiveness, some

of our sisters and brothers *will not be forgiven*. Indeed inaction on our part may well “retain their Sins”

One of my favorite parts of “Alice in Wonderland” has the King of Hearts saying: “The horror of that moment I shall never, never, forget” “You will though, said the Queen, unless you make a memorandum of it” As we look at these post Resurrection appearances of Jesus it is all too easy to see them *only* as evidence of the truth of the Christian faith and reminders of the importance of the resurrection in our theology. They are that, but they are also the first instructions Jesus gave in discipleship.

We live in a world in which there is plenty of sin and a vast amount of Evil. We have only to look at the results of the vengeance-based systems of ethics and justice which motivate so many people to realize that there must be a better way, or as St. Paul reminded the Corinthians, way. *a more excellent way*.