

“A Word of Peace”

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven” (John 20:21-23).

In the book “Mere Christianity” C. S. Lewis dissects and defends the Christian faith by making a compelling case for Christ and the Biblical story of salvation in Him. In his book, Lewis deals with some of the most important theological themes in Scripture and, at one point, he offers this insight about forgiveness: “One... claim (of Christ) tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins... We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you; you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men’s toes and stealing other men’s money?” We would either say that this man was ignorant or a fool. “Yet this is exactly what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He... behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned; the person chiefly offended in all (sins).” And, Lewis concludes, “This makes sense only if (Jesus) really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.”

This profound statement about the forgiveness of sins sits at the center of our faith and, as we consider today’s Gospel lesson, we hear the source of Lewis’s words in the voice Jesus. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven” (John 20:21, 23). In these first words from the risen Christ, we hear Jesus giving instructions to His disciples. In this reading, we find what amounts to a job description for the church and the instructions given to the disciples on that first Easter are the same instructions He gives to us today. “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven” (John 20:23).

You see, the primary job of the Church is to communicate God’s forgiveness! The importance of this truth cannot be overstated and, in fact, this proclamation of forgiveness is absolutely essential to the existence of the church. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news” (Mark 16:15). And following His resurrection in Luke 24, Jesus reminded His disciples that the Messiah was to “suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and (then) repentance and forgiveness of sins (would) be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46-47).

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached. That’s the call of Christ! That’s the job of the church! And, even though this task may seem overly simplistic, this simple job description from Jesus deals with our most dire need. From the blatant and willful things we have done to others, to the sins of which we are completely unaware, our sin has separated us. It has separated us from God, it has separated us from each other, and it has separated us from life. At its root, sin is the essence of the human problem, and it is something we have no power to control or conquer. It is the reason we worry. It is the reason we suffer. It is the reason we face death. It is also why Jesus came.

Jesus Christ came to earth as a human being, took responsibility for our most basic and serious problem, suffered separation from God, from others, and from life itself, and He did all of these things so that we could be forgiven – not only of the sins we have blatantly and willfully done to others, but even for the sins of which we are completely unaware! Because of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. This is why Jesus came, *and sharing this message is precisely the job He has given to His church.*

The job seems basic enough. Share the Gospel. Share the message of forgiveness through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Share the promise of life through His death and resurrection. But how do we do this? How can we, as sinful, flawed, unforgiving human beings be involved in communicating this divine message of God’s perfect love and forgiveness? It starts with worship.

Forgiveness is communicated through worship. I have often heard people say, “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” And even though you may be able to theologically debate this statement, it shows a complete misunderstanding of what happens in worship. The truth is that when we think about worship we often see it as an obligation – something *we* are doing for God. Like everything else in life we automatically place ourselves at the center of picture, but when we view worship as something *we* do, we are completely missing the incredible Gospel work that God is doing to us and in us when we gather around His Word and Sacraments.

You see, God comes to us in worship. At its core, worship is never about what *we* are doing for God, it is primarily and most importantly about what *God* is doing for us. To put it simply, in worship, God delivers His forgiveness. Through God's Word, whether it's spoken by a pastor or sung by a parishioner, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and taught, and in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion God's forgiveness is delivered in the most personal ways. When God comes to us in worship – when He speaks to us through His Word and when He personally deals with us in the miracle of His Sacraments – He is actively leading us to repentance, He is giving us the gift of full forgiveness and He is strengthening us for daily living. Make no mistake, in worship God is communicating and delivering the forgiveness Christ died to accomplish.

And this forgiveness of Christ is also communicated through our relationships with each other. My friends God is relational and just as His forgiveness has been shared with us in personal ways it is also meant to be shared personally. The Bible is not a collection of intellectual truths to be mastered or a puzzle to be solved. It is God's love letter to the world, it is always personal, and it is meant to be shared in the most personal ways and not only on Sunday mornings. In Deuteronomy 6, God told His people, "Impress (My Words) on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

What does God mean with these words? He is telling us that communicating His love and forgiveness is something that happens in the course of everyday life, within our closest relationships. It happens when we pray together as a family. It happens when we go to church together. It happens when we serve together. It happens when we care for each other. It happens when we talk about our own life stories of faith and forgiveness, and it also happens when we bring each other a word of peace.

Many times, the people we love the most are the people we hurt most deeply. As the demands of life overwhelm us, so often the people we turn on are the people closest to us, and the wounds that we inflict on each other by our selfish words and actions can be profound. But God's Word tells us that we are forgiven for *all* sins, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through His Word, God also enables us to confess to one another and to be reconciled. Forgiveness is most definitely shared through relationships and when we forgive each other in Christ, we are doing the job of the Church.

In today's Gospel reading from John we see this personal application of the forgiveness demonstrated in beautiful and moving way. We are told in the first verse of the reading that the, "disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews." Just hours before, these followers of Jesus had watched their friend and Lord suffer an unimaginable and humiliating death and they had done nothing to help him; they had shown him no support or compassion. In fact, they had done just the opposite. When the guards came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane these followers fled and when Peter was confronted in the courtyard of the high priest as a disciple of Jesus he vehemently denied even knowing the Savior. These men must have been racked with guilt and drowning in shame and, as they cowered in a locked room, they were terrified that they might be the next ones nailed to a cross.

It's to these poor, broken, pathetic people that Jesus appears. And His first words change everything: "Peace be with you!" By human standards, He had every reasonable right to forsake these men who had so quickly forsaken Him. By human standards, He had every reasonable right to condemn if not avenge their abandonment in His greatest hour of need. But Jesus doesn't deal with them by human standards. Instead of rebuke or revenge, Jesus offers a word of peace. He proclaims forgiveness. He announces absolution. He restores them to a right relationship with God...and that is exactly what Jesus does for us as well.

Through Christ's blood God has "forgiven our sins and cleansed us from all unrighteousness." Through the waters of Holy Baptism He has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us. And through His Word He has given us a very clear job description: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (John 20:33). The job God has given His church – the job He has given us – is to share the forgiveness that is found in Jesus Christ. Through the proclamation of this word of peace God creates faith, disciples are made and God's Kingdom grows. My friends, when we communicate God's forgiveness, we truly are doing the job of church. May God grant us the strength to share this word of peace. Amen.

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