

“A Word of Peace”

*“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...  
If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (John 20:21, 23).*

In his book “Mere Christianity” C. S. Lewis makes this important observation about Jesus: “We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. (If) you tread on my toe...I forgive you; (if) you steal my money...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 say that this man was either 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 then Lewis concludes, “This makes sense only if (Jesus) really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.”

Of course, this is *exactly* the truth about the forgiveness of sins that Christ won for us and in today’s Gospel lesson, we hear this very thing straight from the mouth of Jesus. Jesus said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (John 20:21, 23). In these words from the risen Christ, we hear Jesus giving instructions to His disciples; we find what amounts to a job description for the church and here’s the critical point: the directives given to the disciples on that first Easter are the same ones He gives to us today. “If you forgive the sins of any, 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 fact, every Gospel makes this point. In Mark, 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.”

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 simplistic, this basic job description from Jesus deals with our most dire need. From the blatant and willful wrongs we have done to others, to the offences of which we are completely unaware, our sin has ruined us. It has removed us from fellowship God, it has divided 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 on our own. It is the reason we worry. It is the reason we suffer. It is the reason we die. *It is also the reason 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, it’s what His words “Peace be with you” mean...*and sharing this message is precisely the job He has given to His church.*

The job seems simple 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? Believe it or not, the answer to this question starts with worship.

You see, the forgiveness of sins is given 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 theologize and 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 something *we* are doing for God. Like everything else in life we automatically put ourselves at the center of the picture, but when we view worship as something *we* do, we completely miss the point and overlook the incredible thing that God is doing for us and to us and in us when we gather around His Word and Sacraments.

You see, at its core, worship is never about what *we* are doing for God! Instead it is primarily and most importantly about what *God* is doing for us! To put it very simply, in worship, God delivers His forgiveness. Through God's Word, whether it's spoken by a pastor or heard in the lyrics of hymn, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and taught, and in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion God's forgiveness is bestowed on us in intimately 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 and He is giving us the gift of full forgiveness and He is strengthening us for daily living. Make no mistake, in worship God is delivering the forgiveness for Christ died to bring.

And this forgiveness of Christ is also communicated in 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 learned or disciplines to be mastered or some puzzle to be solved. It is God's love letter to the world, it is always personal, and it is also 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). In these words God is telling us that communicating His love and forgiveness is something that happens in everyday life. It happens when we eat together as a family. It happens when we work through conflicts 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. *It happens when we bring each other a word of peace!*

Usually the people we love the most are the people we hurt most deeply. As the demands and anxieties 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 today God tells us that we are forgiven for *all* of our sins and, as the Holy Spirit works on us through the Word, God also enables us to see our sin clearly and to be honest with each other and to repent to one another *and to be reconciled*. Forgiveness must be shared in and through our relationships and, my friends, when we forgive each other and relationships are restored, 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 a 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 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, Peter vehemently denied even knowing Him. These men must have been racked with guilt and shrouded in shame and yet as they cowered in a locked room, their biggest concern was that they might be the next to die.

It's to these poor, broken, cowardly men that Jesus appears...and His first words change everything: "Peace be with you!" By human standards, He had every reason to forsake these men who had so quickly forsaken Him. By human standards, He had every reason 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 and He restores them to a right relationship...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 "rebirth and renewal" by His Holy Spirit. 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 same forgiveness that Christ has so graciously given to us. You see, through this word of peace, God creates faith; through this word of peace, disciples are made; through this word of peace, God's Kingdom comes. My friends, when we communicate God's forgiveness, we are truly doing the job of the Church. May God grant us the strength to share this word of peace. Amen.

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