

Pentecost Year A Set Free from Unbelief John 20 vv19 to 23

This story breathes a life of hope and action into us – in the here and now – because we have a lot in common with this small group of disciples, more than may be obvious at first glance.

Like this small group in the upper room on the day of the resurrection – the first day of the week – Sunday – we are gathered. And, if I ask a few questions, it would soon become obvious that we, too, are fearful. The survival of the church, unexpected big financial bills, health concerns, increasing gun violence, a fragile global environment...these are just a few issues causing stress and anxiety. I couldn't possibly name all that is going on in our lives. To have life is to have struggles. There is always something that needs fixing, something that needs doing, there is always something we could be worrying about. It may be tempting to lock the door on the world and keep everything troubling away from us – if that were possible.

The disciples are huddled behind locked doors – fearful not only of the survival of their young church, simply a movement at that point, but also fearful for their lives. Jesus comes and stands among them and says, “Peace be with you.” Did you notice that this has no effect on them? The story doesn't say, “the disciples stared blankly at him” or “the disciples stared at him in disbelief” but, that is precisely what happened. Jesus must show to them that is really is him – he shows them the marks of the nails in his hands and he shows them the sword wound in his side. Then the disciples rejoice. When they are sure that the risen Lord stands among them, then they rejoice. When they realize what God has done, they rejoice. At this point, Jesus again says, “peace be with you” and he breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is the process that we go through each week together. As it was with the disciples then, it still is sometimes difficult to rejoice in God's presence when something is bothering us, difficult to believe that the risen Lord stands among us. We cannot lock the doors of the church and keep all that is broken or troubling us on the outside of the walls. It comes in here with us. But, in here, we can give all that is broken in us, in our lives, in the world, we can give all of it into God's capable hands and remember what God has done for us so that we, too, may rejoice. As God stands among us, God shows us what he has done – just as Jesus showed his hands and side to the disciples. Our entire liturgy is an act of remembering and celebrating but our Eucharistic Prayers, in particular, do this for us – they lead us to rejoice through remembering what God has done. Each of these prayers begins with an invitation for us to lift up our hearts and to give our thanks. We say, sure, it is right to give our thanks and praise but, we're not really feeling it right now. And so the prayers rehearse for us what God has done, remind us that *our* history is God's history of salvation and then we're ready to rejoice, ready to sing our praise with all the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Christ stands among us and now we are ready to receive him. In joy we feast together at God's table, remembering that through Christ's death and resurrection we receive Christ's body because we are Christ's body, joined with him in baptism, carrying the Holy Spirit within us who brings us into the life of God, with God, in God's kingdom. Our worship liturgy comes to a close on this triumphant note of joy. We praise God through the generations, in the Church, and in Christ Jesus. We rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, and we are reminded that we are given the peace that passes all understanding as God places his name on us

once more and sends us out into the world to face all that we cannot – and should not – lock out.

We go into the world with the peace of Christ and we go into the world with the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as we are immediately sent, so, too, are the disciples. They are given the peace of Christ, they receive the Holy Spirit and Jesus gives them their marching orders: As my Father sent me, he says, so now I send you...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

These may seem like strange sending instructions until we remember the rest of John's Gospel in which we find them and we realize Jesus' purpose. Jesus is speaking in the future tense of things that have not yet happened: If you forgive the sins of any, they will be forgiven. Jesus is giving power and authority to a fearful group of men and women who feel hopeless and despairing. They don't feel like they have any power. They don't feel like they have any authority. Those feelings left them when Jesus was brutally murdered. Likewise, we, as the Church, may feel powerless. We may feel that we have no authority. But that is to think in terms of the world's power and that is most certainly not what Jesus is giving to us.

God's power is love – nothing but love. It is a love that gives the peace that the world cannot give. It is a love that brings joy in the midst of troubles. It is a love that fills us with hope in knowing that each day brings us closer to the time when God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. It is a love that banishes darkness, lifts up the oppressed, and mends all brokenness. That is the love we carry within us – the power that can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. We have

been given the authority to forgive or retain sins and, in John's Gospel, that is very much connected with the power of God's love.

Jesus is not setting us up as his moral watchdog. He does not commission us to weigh the good deeds and offences of others on the scales of justice. Only God forgives sins. So what is Jesus talking about then? Throughout all of John's Gospel, we are directed toward belief – belief in God through Jesus Christ. That is, in fact, the reason why John writes his Gospel – so that we may come to believe. In John's Gospel, Jesus talks about sin as unbelief – the unwillingness or the inability to understand the truth that he and God are one. To have sin, then, is to remain apart from God. Sin is the ongoing resistance, the refusal to recognize God's revelation in Jesus even when experiencing it. The resurrected Jesus today tells all of his followers that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they can release people, set them free from the brokenness of the world. "Set free" or "release" is a better translation of the word we hear as "forgive". Jesus' disciples are being directed to become a part of his mission – to see others come to believe in Jesus and his good news of God's arriving kingdom. We are to set people free from unbelief by sharing the love of God.

If we do not do this, we will be surrounded by a world full of people left unable to know and love God. Their unbelief will be retained. A church that does not wield the power of God's love is a church that "leaves itself unable to play a role in delivering people from all that keeps them from experiencing the fullness [of life] that Jesus offers" (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org).

The question now is, how do we wield the power of God's love? How do we set people free from unbelief? Every word, every act that builds relationship is

wielding God's love. Every little kindness, care, compassion is God's love at work in the world. According to Mother Teresa, "To smile at someone who is sad; to visit, even for a little while, someone who is lonely; to give someone shelter from the rain with our umbrella; to read something for someone who is blind: these and others can be small things, very small things, but they are appropriate to give our love of God concrete expression" (p.21 of *Mother Teresa Her Essential Wisdom*). She cautions that the words of Jesus, "Love one another as I have loved you," must be not only a light for us but a flame that consumes the self in us. Love, she says, in order to survive, must be nourished by [giving], especially the [giving] of self (p.17).

Every one of us has gifts that we were given to use to reveal God's kingdom, to build the body of Christ, showing God's love, lighting the darkness, mending the brokenness. With individual gifts used together we can tackle issues that we would rather lock outside the door. I am giving you the power and authority, says Jesus, to set people free from unbelief. "Peace be with you" and he breathed on us the Holy Spirit. Breathe in the hope. Breathe in the joy. Breathe in the call to action and, as we transform through the power of God's love dwelling within us, let us, then, be agents of transformation in the world.