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You Want Us To Do What?!? I. Forgive

John 20:19-23 NRSV 19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

I have a clergy colleague who once entitled a sermon series "Weird Stuff That Jesus Said." Now, you may think that is not very elegantly put, but she does have a point. For Jesus did indeed say some things that sound odd to our ears, sometimes very difficult things to understand, sometimes things that even seem pretty harsh. And, likewise, this time in the story of our faith is also one of those strange times in which Jesus does indeed say some difficult things. Why is this a strange time? Well, think about it: Last week we celebrated Easter, the story of God's triumph over the forces of human evil and mendacity and death with the news that the tomb where Jesus had been placed was empty and that he was alive again. That is strange news enough, is it not? And then for the next several weeks of the story, the resurrected Jesus appears in various ways – depending on which gospel writer is telling the story – to the disciples. And in those appearances Jesus does indeed offer what can look to be some strange, odd, and even disturbing words. Today's scripture is one such appearance and it is full and it is complex. And what I want to most focus on are those words at the end about

forgiveness, but before I do that, we need to see more of the scripture's context and the meaning of the words that precede those words about forgiveness. So let's begin:

Our story today is set on Sunday night, and the disciples have gathered secretly. And they no doubt gathered amidst a complex swirl of feelings and emotion and exhaustion. After all, in the week just past they had seen their leader, their teacher, their friend at the heights of triumph upon entering Jerusalem, then betrayed to the Roman authorities who were very concerned about the possibility that Jesus was going to lead a revolt, then given a sham trial, flogged hideously, and then executed in an unusually cruel and awful and public way. And now the disciples themselves had to be worried that the authorities were now after them as Jesus' co-conspirators and so they indeed met secretly, behind locked doors, to comfort one another, to mourn, to grieve. Can you blame them?

But before we move forward, we must linger a moment on that line in the story that says they locked themselves in "for fear of the Jews." First, we need to remember something about the gospel of John: it was written around the year 90 or so when relationships between the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and those who did were becoming very, very strained. Prior to this, as I have told you before, it would be more accurate to say that those who affirmed Christ were one kind of Jews and those who didn't were another. But they were all Jews yet. But when Rome stepped up its vicious persecutions, both parties began finger-pointing and saying things about each other were regrettable. For, you see, what this was, in essence, was a family fight, and sometimes family fights can be the most vicious, can't they? And, after all, think about it: all eleven of those disciples in that room were in fact Jews! Yet it

wouldn't make much sense to say "these Jews locked themselves in that room for fear of the Jews." You see, the writer of the gospel of John is reading a **tenth** decade situation back into a **fourth** decade circumstance in a way that simply doesn't match reality and which should never, ever give us any license to impugn or denigrate "the Jews."

Second bit of context: Notice **how** Jesus appears among them and **what** he does. Notice that in John's rendering of the story, He's simply there, all-of-a-sudden. It doesn't say He knocked on the door; it simply says: there He was! This tiny but important detail is meant to reinforce the understanding that Jesus was indeed truly divine, truly the son of God, truly one with powers miraculous enough to suddenly appear within a locked room. That's the "how." But then look what he **does**: he shows them his hands where the nails had been and his side where the spear had pierced Him. This is kind of an odd thing, on the face of it, to do as one's very first action upon entering a gathering. I mean, I suspect none of us go to parties and right off the bat ask folks if they want to see our scars! Yet *this* point is also carefully included to remind the reader that not only is Jesus divine, but he is fully human too. For you, see even at that early date – the last decade of the first century – there were those who wanted to say that Jesus only "appeared" to be human, that he wasn't **really** human, and that he really didn't suffer. But John, like the rest of the Church from then on, rejected that view because it too easily became twisted and used to say that this purely "spiritual" Jesus isn't really concerned, therefore, about the messy realities of human life, isn't really concerned about hunger and homelessness and sickness and sorrow, but only about those allegedly "spiritual" things. But that is just not true, and when we go there we end

up too easily dismissing the world's injustices and oppressions instead of confronting them as the human Jesus himself surely did, for He Himself had been truly scarred by those things.

Now, having dealt with some of the important context of this passage, we come to Jesus' words about forgiveness; hear them again: *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* As you may know, the way the Roman Catholic church has interpreted these words is to say that the Church's priests – who are in the Catholic view, the direct descendants of those first disciples – are thereby the ones empowered to offer God's forgiveness or to withhold it; they are the ones to whom, therefore, confession of sins is to be made and from whom forgiveness sought. Now, of course, the Protestant point of view is very different; we Disciples, along with all other Protestants instead hold the view that there is a "priesthood of **all** believers" and that one's relationship with God does not need any sort of intermediary. Clergy, in the Protestant view can be – hopefully! – helpful guides to the faith, teachers to be respected, folks to be listened to, but they do not act on behalf of God in the way that the Catholic church has interpreted these words.

But, still, we're left with the question: what **do** Jesus' words say, then, to us? Well, just this: It strikes me that Jesus' words about forgiveness here are simply a statement of fact. *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them."* Because, think about it: on those occasions on which you have simply found yourself unable to bring yourself to forgive someone, isn't it true that their sin against you is in fact "retained" by you? It continues to affect you. It continues to fester. It continues to leave very real marks and scars on you. And, on the other hand, on those occasions

when someone else won't forgive you for some hurt you've done, some insensitive thing you've said, some harm you've caused, isn't it also true that you "retain" that and your life can end up being consumed by regret? Jesus is just doing some plain speaking here: unforgiven sin, unforgiven hurts, continue to be retained, continue to affect one's life.

Forgiveness. It is one of the simplest and yet hardest words in the Christian vocabulary. And there is much confusion, I believe, about what it means. But Jesus' words remind us that forgiveness – or the lack of forgiveness – is indeed serious and life-altering, and we had better try to be clear about what we do and don't mean by this notion. With that in mind, let me offer three points about forgiveness. There is so much more that could be said about forgiveness, but for this morning, let's start with these three points:

First, to forgive is not to forget. That may seem obvious but it's not. For one thing, it's just plain impossible. You can delude yourself that you have forgotten a hurt done to you, and indeed the details and sharpness of the pain do fade, but that hurt will still be there. To claim that it is not gives it a power over you that it need not have. No, to forgive someone is to commit yourself to the best of your ability to not let your future actions be determined by that hurt. In other words, when you forgive, you stop being a victim and you are able to let God be the guide of your life instead of that unacknowledged hurt that has scarred you. Which also means that you forgive someone for the sake of your own restoration and healing as much as for theirs!

Second, forgiveness is not a license for continued abuse. Every clergy person, including me, has encountered women – and on a very, very few occasions,

men – who have been abused by those whom they were in relationship with.

Sometimes horribly abused. And there has been too much insidious theology that has said and continues to say to those women “Well, you must forgive him and go back to him and go back to being abused.” No! No! Remember the first point? To forgive is take control back – or, more accurately, to let God once again be the One who is guiding your life and possibilities – and sometimes, sadly but necessarily, that means that forgiveness in such a situation means removing yourself from the relationship.

Third, a hard but true fact about forgiveness is this: you may forgive but that doesn't necessarily mean that the relationship can be healed or restored. Why? Well, this is where the one forgiven by you must truly recognize the hurt caused, be truly sorry for it, and truly seek to make some sort of reparation for that hurt. Without these moves on the part of the other party, and impaired relationship cannot be healed. The one who hurt you cannot expect to have a renewed relationship with you so long as he or she does not realize or admit to what was done, regret it, and seek to made amends. But that part, again, is simply not up to you.

My wife Barbara and I are friends with couple named Pam and Larry. A decade ago their 21 year old son got into a car one night with a group of friends, with a driver who had had much too much to drink, and who proceeded to horribly crash that car. The woman driving – let's call her Jane – was only slightly injured, but our friends' son Kyle, along with two others in the car, were killed. Barbara and I helped officiate at his funeral. A few months later, Jane was convicted for her role and sentenced to several years in the women's state prison in California. Pam, one of the most quietly strong

Christians I have known, began writing Jane letters and eventually made the four-hour drive to visit her in prison many times. As you might imagine, Jane was so ashamed beyond words that she could hardly look at Pam. But Pam kept going to visit her, kept writing her – not simply for Jane’s sake, but for the sake of her own ability to move forward – and eventually (not right away, mind you) Pam told Jane that she forgave her. Pam later ended up testifying in favor of Jane’s early release.

I tell this story not as some sort of cheap and easy object lesson for you or me, because frankly I don’t know what I’d do in that situation or whether I could do as Pam did. I hope that neither you nor I is ever put in the position to discover that. No, I tell the story to illustrate the incredible power that forgiveness can have in a person’s life. Did Pam’s forgiving Jane make everything “all better”? No, of course not; that would be offensive to even suggest. Does she grieve her son every day? Oh indeed. But by the power of her finally being able to forgive, she thereby asked God not to let this be the thing that forever controlled her life, that forever stunted her from finding new life and new hope, that could have forever kept her trapped. And God, the one from whom every tender mercy flows, the One Who Himself knew the pain of losing a Son, indeed continued to offer Pam the reality of the Easter message that death will not have the last word, that new life is possible. For that good news, thanks be to God. Amen.