

“Putting on the Priest's Collar”

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Text: John 20:19-31

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You've no doubt heard the story countless times. It is the story you saw depicted in the video this morning – Jesus appearing to the disciples and then to Thomas. So significant is this story to the life and faith of the church that is the gospel reading for the Sunday after Easter. It was last year and it will be next year. No matter what year we are in the three-year cycle of scriptures – the lectionary – the Sunday after Easter always presents to us this passage from the Gospel of John.

Now I have shared with you before sermons about Thomas. I've talked about the nature of doubt and faith as shown in the example of “Doubting Thomas.” And I had every intention of doing the same this year – until I got derailed. The derailment was not the fault of Thomas. My problem isn't with him. What threw me for a loop were the words of James. So please allow me to turn the spotlight away from Thomas and back to Jesus for a few minutes this morning.

The scene is John's version of Pentecost when Jesus breathes on His disciples and they receive the Holy Spirit. And then He says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

What is Jesus saying to His disciples and to us? Well, according to Roman Catholic tradition, this verse is evidence that a priest has the power to confer or convey the forgiveness of God, not by his own power, but by the power Christ conferred on His apostles. In other words, through apostolic succession, priests have the responsibility of standing in place of Christ to declare forgiveness of sins. Now that interpretation is one road we could travel this morning.

Another way to view this text is to consider that it has a broader, more corporate interpretation. As one scholar suggests, In John's gospel, sin is a theological failing – it is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. Thus, in this verse, Jesus is commissioning the community of faith to continue the work of making God in Jesus known in the world and thereby bringing the world to the moment of decision and judgment with regard to sin. The community is to continue what God sent Jesus to do.

Now we would not be wrong if we followed that path of interpretation. I want to offer a third view for our consideration. According to a different translation of verse 23, Jesus says, “If you should happen to let go of the sins of anyone, that person is set free: if you lord it over anyone, then that person has been enslaved.” Perhaps with these words, Jesus is not granting the disciples some sort of special power, He is giving them a piece of wisdom. According to Pastor David King Jesus is saying that if we choose to forgive someone or not forgive them, that it actually has an effect on that other person. If we forgive them, we set them free. If we withhold our forgiveness, then we are enslaving that person with the chains of our own negative emotions. To grant forgiveness is a beautiful gift that releases good into the world. Withholding forgiveness is an injury to others and limits the avenues that God has to pour forth grace. So Jesus says if you forgive, you grant freedom, if you withhold forgiveness, then you just create more ways to hold people down.

Now I mentioned earlier that it was these words of Jesus about forgiveness that threw me off track this week. I think it's because there is someone I know I need to forgive of something, but I'm having a very hard time doing it. Have you been there? Is there someone who has done you wrong and you can't get past it? Maybe a co-worker, or relative, or someone at church – maybe it's me, I hope not – or maybe someone you considered a friend turned on you, perhaps someone you thought you could trust betrayed that trust.

That's what happened to me recently. I hesitate in sharing my experience because you may think that I was either naive, too trusting, foolish, or just plain dumb. Most of you know I bought a Mayberry squad car replica last fall in North Carolina. You may recall that even though the car was advertised as being in mint condition, it was anything but that. In my attempt to drive it back to Kansas, I had major mechanical problems, was delayed two days in coming home, and incurred some hefty costs for repairs along the way. I had to have it trucked home instead of me completing my trip with it.

So, I felt taken advantage of from the outset. The seller of the car, a fellow Mayberrian, had let me down big time. Unintentionally, I was hoping. After I arrived home and totaled up my bills, I contacted the seller. He assured me that it had not been his intention to deceive me, and that he wanted to do right by me.

So he agreed in October that he would reimburse me for most of the repair costs I'd incurred on my ill-fated trip home. He told me to expect a check after January 1. Well, you probably know how this story ends. I waited for some communication from him after the first of the year – and nothing. He would not take my phone calls. He did not respond to my e-mails. I gave him the benefit of the doubt in my messages – telling him that I knew he was a man of his word and that I was confident he wanted to resolve this in a way that was fair to both of us and that would reflect Mayberry values. I even told him I would understand if his situation had changed and we needed to agree on a different reimbursement figure.

No response, no check, no phone call, no message – not even an e-mail telling me to drop dead – nothing. After several attempts to have him honor his commitment, I gave up. I've given up hope of ever hearing from him, but I haven't given up being angry and feeling foolish that I trusted him in the first place and that I trusted him a second time. I know I need to let it go, to get over it. But I've developed a real dislike for the guy and am not wishing him well. I don't like being lied to and taken advantage of and left holding the bag, or in this case, a bag full of repair bills. You may be thinking of me what I think of someone who gets scammed by the Nigerian bank account ploy – you got what you deserved. Maybe I did. My head tells me to move on and forgive this guy, but my heart's not ready. Maybe you're in the same place with someone else.

Jesus calls His disciples to be about the task of forgiveness. Jesus calls us to be about the task of forgiveness. What is forgiveness, anyway? Let's first say what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not carelessness or indifference to wrong. It's not permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards. It is not blanket tolerance. Forgiveness is not possible without standards and values being violated. Without persons or relationships being hurt; without a loss so deeply felt that efforts at restoration are pursued. You see, from a distance, forgiveness may look like condoning or permissiveness, but in reality forgiveness takes the violator, the violated, and the violation seriously. In Greek, forgive is translated “erase,” wipe out, cancel a debt, release, let go. Lewis Smedes has written extensively on forgiveness and says this:

“Forgiveness is going to a person either in your fantasies or in reality and saying, ‘I don't understand. I'll never understand and it wasn't okay, and it isn't okay, but I forgive you.’ Forgiving doesn't make a person a door mat. . . . Forgivers don't have to be fools. Forgiving is healing yourself of something that happened to you that you cannot tolerate, but you forgive it as the only way to heal the wound that it left you with. Forgiveness is not forgetting; rather, it is choosing not to actively remember. Forgiveness is choosing to not constantly pick at the scab – it is choosing to not go in the backyard every day to turn over the same rock to see if the snake is still there. Forgiveness is not saying, ‘I don't feel the pain anymore.’ Rather, it is saying, ‘I do not feel the need to hold on to your involvement in my pain anymore. I refuse to continue giving you that kind of power in my life.’”

Smedes suggests that forgiveness is a four stage process:

1. Acknowledge the hurt – admit you've been hurt deeply.
2. Blame – acknowledge that the person is at fault – they're to blame.
3. Surrender your right to get even to balance scales – learn that you can live with scales unbalanced, loose ends centered.
4. Begin to reverse your feelings about the other person.

The other person, the person hurt us so deeply, rejoins the human race, feelings change – the first time we can wish or pray that something good can happen to them – when you can do that, you know you're on your way. Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained” Jesus is entrusting us with His own ministry of forgiveness.

We can do many things for ourselves in our spiritual journeys – read the Bible, pray and worship. But when it comes to hearing that we are forgiven, it helps to hear a priestly voice. That's the priest's calling – to declare the absolution of sins. If we don't forgive those who hurt us, the only alternative is to retain the sins, to hold onto the hurt, which locks ourselves into the identity of victim.

According to Pastor Craig Barnes:

We can be either a priest or a victim. Those are our only options. We can't forget about the hurt, or deny it or store it up to use later. To be a priest is to free others of shame and ourselves of hurt. To be a victim is to hold onto hurt, which is like holding onto a disease. It will eat up our souls. It doesn't matter what we do or how hard we try – we are never going to have a better past.

When the hurts are great, it's hard to be the priest. We wonder, how can I ever get to the place of giving up such overwhelming hurt? But we're not on our own for this. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit before He called us to forgive.

So this means that we disciples are not called to produce forgiveness. We're called to be the priests pronouncing that which has been produced on the cross. We're called to open the locks and throw open the door.

For as Lewis Smedes declares: "When you forgive someone you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner you set free is you."

Let us pray: O God, I know that having my trust betrayed is not the end of the world. But it still hurts. Help me release my bitterness. Help me get on down the road of forgiveness, so that I can set free him and me. Amen.