

The Collect for the Second Sunday of Easter captures fundamental elements of what we need to be headed toward, as the followers of the Risen Christ. In the prayer at the opening of the liturgy today, we affirmed that God established with humankind, through Christ's offering on the cross (a divine mystery) the new covenant of reconciliation; further, we prayed that the rebirth experienced by Christ's fellowship would be evidenced not only by a profession of faith, but also by outward signs, through the action of our lives... by the grace of God, through Christ and the power of God's spirit. That pretty much says it all; resurrection, new beginnings, faith, forgiveness, restoration, power, signs, witness, the reigning of God's spirit, widespread, into eternity.

But it doesn't usually seem to happen that simply, does it?

Nor was it quite that simple for the disciples in the first hours and days following Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospel according to John pictures them meeting in the familiar upper room with the doors locked, full of fear and uncertainty, drained and demoralized, having experienced the loss of the greatest hope they could ever have imagined.

Jesus appears and the first thing he says is "peace be with you." Peace, shalom, wellness, assurance, empathy- all captured in those simple words. (It puts me in mind of the words the angel spoke to Mary: "Fear not." When such words come from a heavenly messenger or the Son of Man, they have great authority, but as we know, sometimes people like you and me are slow to accept or understand them, so they have to be repeated... Peace be with you. A statement, an admonition, words of instruction, perhaps. Have peace, Be peaceful. Know peace. Practice peace. Something not static, a projection, something to be pursued, lived into...

The Gospel notes that Jesus showed them his I.D. badge, the marks on his hands and his side, so there would be no mistake... And Boys Howdy, were they excited to recognize him... And then he repeats the Peace and passes the mantle he has been given, by God, on to them. "The father has send me, now I send you." "You are it!" And the divine breath is poured into them; these formerly breathless and empty human followers are literally pumped up by God's spirit, rejuvenated, given new life and roles as those sent out- "apostles."

And there is more, isn't there. Jesus makes clear that forgiveness is fundamental to their work and their being his heirs, successors, partners. It would seem that Jesus and his disciples needed re-bonding and forgiveness from him and among themselves first, a kind of healing before they could move on to their work. The spirit is given in order to forgive, themselves and others, in turn. The implication, I believe, is that they are not going to receive and live in God's peace without forgiveness. Which makes sense, doesn't it, because probably we know from our own experience and observing others, that when forgiveness is not given and/or received, when there is enmity, hatred, bitterness, or withholding, there is a kind of bondage which doesn't allow freedom and openness of relationship, reconciliation of people, groups, or nations. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is

a great and positive example. Unfortunately, split and conflicted families and civil strife are common, negative examples. I expect you can think of many more, both positive and negative examples. (A couple of examples are described)

Jesus understood this when he gave them their marching orders: Have Peace, Be Peace, give and receive forgiveness as you have given the power of forgiveness and the authority to forgive. Just by the way, it has always felt awesome to me to be ordained by God's church and empowered by God's spirit to pronounce such forgiveness, just as it has been humbling and life-changing to receive such forgiveness, again and again.

Jesus notes that sins that are not given up, not forgiven, persist in their oppression. Well do we take to heart this truth, not as an indictment, but as a caution that when we resist or withhold forgiveness, sin endures and often grows stronger. I truly believe that there would be a lot more mercy and forgiveness in this world, in human relationships, in community relations, in race relations, and in places where there is civil strife and violence, if we really understood and affirmed the Christian belief that such mercy and forgiveness come freely and first from God to each and everyone of us. Our job is to share it, pass it on, as God intended. True repentance and reconciliation, of course, are what we hope for too, but mercy and willingness to forgive often need to be experienced first.

The Gospel writer notes that Thomas missed the earlier appearance and commissioning by the Risen Christ, and at first when he heard the other disciples speaking about their experience of the Risen Lord, he wasn't so sure about it, just as we might not accept "hear-say" evidence. But then Jesus appears and repeats the divine greeting "peace be with you," and Thomas responds with faithful affirmation. Such is the power of God in the life of any of us, a gift really, whether we have been visited by an angel, a vision of Christ himself, or maybe just a dream, a nudge, or the humbling, life-changing acceptance and forgiveness of another faithful, loving human being.

The final part of today's Gospel makes clear that God had a purpose in appearing to the disciples. The Gospel narrative records them in a particular way; the testimony and action of Jesus and his disciples are related so that generations of followers of Jesus, known through the ages as "Christians," may come to believe in Jesus as Messiah, and through believing may have life in his name. I would note that my understanding is that faithfulness is not so much a rational, cognitive assent, so much as it is an embracing of Jesus as he lived, died, and was raised, and the living out of his ways, in turn, as his successors and co-creators in our current time frame, in our own world.

Studies in human behavior and change indicate that significant growth, recovery, and reform often begin not through a rational process, working through our brains, but by risking new behaviors and working through our hearts, and then rationality and thoughtful reflections follow such action or behavior. Prayer is a significant help too, of course.

Through faithful action, forgiveness, sacrifice, service, prayer, building communities have f peace, reaching out to the poor and homeless, the hungry, orphans and widows, prisoners and captives, we are witnesses of Jesus, and God's servants responding to Jesus' commission, using God-given resources and opportunities in order that we and others may celebrate this blessed state of Peace- with God, with ourselves, and with others.

Finally, we should note that the various ministries within and beyond this congregation which we support, such as the outreach projects featured in the Adult Forum this morning, are extensions of God's peace and justice, very real and practical ways of living out the Gospel imperative. As the familiar words of dismissal put it: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."