

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE
Sermon for Pentecost A – Jn 20:19-23
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We are indeed blessed here at Lawrencefield Parish Church. Everyone here not only seems to get along but genuinely likes each other. All in all things function pretty well. Unfortunately this equanimity is not universal in houses of worship.

We've all heard of churches that have experienced some kind of major crisis that threatens to tear the community apart. Perhaps there has been sexual misconduct on the part of the leadership, or some shady handling of finances, or maybe there's just been a major disagreement between members, or a rift between parishioners and the clergy. Somehow, even when the presenting problem gets resolved, even after the troublemakers leave, or there's a change of rector, these parishes often continue to be troubled. Sometimes the problem seems to go away, but a year later the parish is in crisis again.

This happens on a personal scale too. Someone identifies exactly what's wrong with his/her life. It's the job, or the spouse, or the location, or the shape of their body. They quit the job, divorce the spouse, move across the country and/ or have plastic surgery. But for some people problems keep coming back. Maybe the same problems, maybe different ones.

If you knew someone who was still chronically unhappy after changing jobs, spouses, location or body image, what would you say? The person has identified a problem and dealt with it, but the problem that's been addressed is not the root problem. Probably you would observe that until that person finds some kind of peace within, he or she is unlikely to be happy regardless of the situation. Something inside has to heal.

The same is true in parishes. No matter who is the rector, no matter how well the books are kept, no matter what is the condition of the worship space or the style of the liturgy, the parish is unlikely to function healthily if something inside has yet to heal.

Fortunately, there is a biblical antidote to this kind of vicious circle. It's called forgiveness. Forgiveness means zeroing out – of a debt, of sin, of blame, or guilt. Where there is forgiveness, the thing, whatever it is, for a practical matter no longer exists. Forgiveness makes redemption possible. That's why Jesus talks so much about forgiveness.

Now to make something that exists not exist requires the intervention of God, the Lord of existence. When Jesus' opponents tell him, "No one can forgive sins but God alone," they are absolutely correct. No one can truly forgive, that is, annihilate, sin except God, in the sense of making it like it never even happened.

For human beings, who need forgiveness to stop running in circles, this is a problem. Or it would be a problem if not for the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

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In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection. In this passage Jesus does more than show himself to be alive after being dead. As we heard, Jesus also breathes on his friends and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, what, exactly, is the gift of the Holy Spirit? If we ever had any doubt about the answer to that question, Jesus tells us point blank. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the power to forgive. Through Jesus God is bestowing upon the apostles divine power. God shares with humanity a power that is by nature God's alone.

What Jesus actually says is, "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any they are retained." The first part of this is plain: God bestows on human beings the power to forgive, as I have just explained. What does the second half of this pronouncement mean: "If you retain the sins of any they are retained"? Is Jesus sanctioning us to withhold forgiveness?

As St. Paul would say, "By no means." Jesus is not giving us permission to withhold forgiveness. He is stating fact. Without forgiveness, sin hangs around; continuing to harm both sinner and the one sinned against.

That is why dysfunctional congregations continue to self-destruct regardless of who the rector is. That is why people continue to be miserable when all the named conditions of their lives are reset. There can be no healing without forgiveness. Problems are retained when forgiveness has not occurred.

Forgiveness can happen in many forms. Sometimes, as in the case of people in recovery, forgiveness happens in the admission of powerlessness over addiction. Sometimes, as in the case of a wounded congregation, forgiveness happens in the naming of grief, or in both sides in a controversy admitting responsibility.

Whatever form forgiveness takes, forgiveness must happen for redemption to occur. And, since redemption is God's work, forgiveness must happen for God's work to be done. That is why God, in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, shares with people the power to forgive.

Today is Pentecost – the day we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the early disciples, enabling them to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ understood to the ends of the earth. They are given this ability through the gift of languages.

Not all of us are gifted with languages. But we all have the ability to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ understood to the ends of our respective worlds. That's because everyone understands the language of forgiveness. And we have been given the power to forgive.