

John 20:19-23

“So I Send You”

Those of us who have been in the church for a while, have a passage that comes to mind when we hear the words, “Great Commission”. Most of us immediately go to the command from Jesus found in Matthew, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

These are not only words of instruction but words of promise. However, as I studied the text for this morning, a lead in to the words that earned Thomas his reputation of being “doubting Thomas”, I realized that THIS is *John’s version* of the Great Commission. Jesus gives his disciples peace, tells them that he is sending them out, fills them with the Holy Spirit, and instructs them to forgive before they can minister effectively. By these few verses we understand that we, too, are commissioned to be agents of extending the new life that the resurrection assures us all.

John tells us that the disciples were afraid and that is understandable. Having witnessed the crucifixion and having heard about the resurrection, the disciples are filled with a mixture of fear and joy, doubt and faith. And doesn’t that just describe life for all of us? Elie Wiesel, the Romanian Jew who survived Auschwitz and then went on to be a champion for peace once wrote: “My tradition teaches that no heart is as whole as a broken heart, and I would say that no faith is as solid as a wounded faith.” It seems that faith and doubt is a double-edged sword.

I believe John includes this first appearance to his disciples from Jesus as a reminder that, although we celebrate resurrection, that does not erase past suffering. The fact that Jesus reappears with his wounds still visible is a sure sign of incarnation. Jesus became SO MUCH LIKE US that he did not even heal himself before he came back. This was intentional on his part, reassuring us that he can truly identify with us, even though he has done the miraculous. Conquered death! It can also be a powerful reminder to us when we face FUTURE suffering, which we *all* surely will do.

As John says, the disciples are behind closed doors. This is because they are afraid. They are afraid of their own betrayal as well as their broken relationship with the Jewish community. But since we are fresh from studying the “I AM” statements from Jesus, it seems an appropriate time to remind us all that Jesus said, “I AM THE DOOR”. We can no more keep Jesus out of our lives that we can keep fear and pain out. Jesus’ goes through the closed doors to show his woundedness so we will find reassurance that he is IN the world as well as OF the world. This gives the first disciples, as well as each of us, the courage to obey the commission that we all have been given, knowing that God supplies all that we need to fulfill it.

Recognizing their fear, the first thing Jesus gives the disciples is peace. Of course, the Hebrew word “shalom” does not simply mean the absence of war or conflict. It was offered in Jesus’ day as sort of a “hello”, but it encompasses so much more. The word means, “I pray for you to be filled with wholeness, healing and contentment.” It was indeed an empowering word for Jesus to begin his visit with. It is also reminiscent of the Jesus words, “Let not your hearts be troubled . . . my peace I give to you.”

This peace is what gave the disciples the courage to start churches even when it was against Roman law. It gave them the fortitude to leave their homes and go to foreign lands and

preach the Gospel, even if it meant imprisonment and death. And today, it is what give us the courage to face the horror of terrorism in Sri Lanka, the sorrow of the shooting in the synagogue in California, the floods in Texas and war and child abuse and disability and mental illness and even death knowing that the peace of God is victorious over all of life's opponents.

Being assured that Christ has delivered his peace into our hearts, even though we remain fearful and doubting, enables us to live AS IF we believe that the resurrection was the inauguration of a new era. A new reign of justice and joy. So, this text is a reminder that human weakness and failure do not keep Christ from being present in the world with power and grace AND that God uses powerless and graceless people to accomplish God's motives. People like the disciples. People like us.

John also tells us that Jesus gave the disciples the promised Holy Spirit. Remember, in the text I referred to just a moment ago, not only did Jesus promise peace but he also promised not to leave us as orphans. He said, "The Holy Spirit will come to you and give you all that you need." Lest the disciples wonder if that Spirit had arrived, John tells us that Jesus actually *breathed* the Spirit into them. This is reminiscent of the creation story that these Jews knew well. Just as God breathed life into the first humans when he made them, Jesus literally breathed his presence into his closest friend, a symbol not only of resurrection but of Re-creation.

However, a key factor in this commission and God's expectations of how we are to go about it, is Jesus' advice to us about forgiveness. And that is the way I read his words – more as guidance or instruction than they are admonition. Jesus says that if we are truly to be his witnesses, we must forgive. Only Jesus can say this with such authority!

Think of all that Jesus had to forgive. Family that thought he was crazy. Rejection by his own people. A trumped-up trial for treason and blasphemy. His closest friend, Peter, denying

that he knew him. One of his disciples betraying him for money that equaled a little over a month's wages!

Yet, as he hung, battered and beaten, tortured and taunted, he prayed to God: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus' example and his hopes that we will not hold on to the sins of others is a reminder that we do our best work for God when our hearts are filled with the right things. Hope and love! Forgiveness rather than bitterness or resentment.

But even more, I believe Jesus is reminding us that the most effective disciples are the ones who can live with a spirit of forgiveness, even before the need to forgive arises. That realizing that you have been offered eternal life, through absolutely no merit of your own, will give you a constant need to forgive others, even before the sins are committed.

One of the foremost modern authors on the subject of forgiveness is Dallas Willard. Willard says that when we live with a spirit of forgiveness, we are choosing to live a "large life". Thus, we release the past claims that anyone, including ourselves, has on us and walk away from the misery and deception that are NOT a part of the resurrection life. Willard writes: "Once we step into this kingdom and trust it, compassion becomes the atmosphere in which we live...It is not psychologically possible for us really to know God's compassion for us and at the same time be hardhearted toward others. So, we are forgiving of others in the same manner as God forgives us."

And perhaps the primary reason that Jesus included these words on forgiveness in John's version of the Great Commission is to remind us that we truly CANNOT preach grace unless we are willing to accept it for ourselves and to show it to others. Forgiveness must be our way of life because the cost of UN-forgiveness is not worth the price we pay. Dale Carnegie visited

Yellowstone Park where he saw a grizzly bear. The huge animal was in the center of a clearing, feeding on some discarded camp food. For several minutes he feasted alone—no other creature dared draw near.

After a few moments a skunk walked through the meadow toward the food and took his place next to the grizzly. The bear didn't object and Carnegie knew why – it would cost the bear too much to get even. I believe John includes these words because Jesus is reminding us all that you may be able to get even with your enemies, but it does not pay. So why not forgive instead?

The true highlight of this passage, however, is found right in the middle, rising up like a high mountain in between Christ breathing peace on the disciples and advising them to forgive. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” By phrasing it this way, Jesus reminds his disciples that our mission is to be partnered **WITH God THROUH Jesus**.

John's Gospel, which is my favorite birth narrative begins: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. . . full of grace and truth.” While Luke places Jesus in the manger, John places him in the world, where we need him most. And not as a king or prophet or warrior but as a baby, made of flesh and blood. By reminding us that God SENT him and IN TURN that we are sent, it is easy to make the connection. The three-legged stool of Father, Son and Holy Spirit now become a four-legged table on which the truth will stand.

How fitting that Jesus' initial response to us after his resurrection is to remind us that, just as he came in to the world to become one with us, we are becoming one with those to whom WE are sent. Filled with the peace that Jesus breathed into us, empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit and forgiven and freed by the perfect sacrifice of God's son, we now have everything we need to serve God and share the good news. It is *by* the Spirit that we *carry* the Spirit and in turn, give it to others.

Also, I always like to take the opportunity to reflect on the word “Dwelt” or “Lived” among us. The word is better translated from Greek as “pitched a tent.” The Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us. Jesus rolled up his sleeves and got in the very dirt of our lives, willing to experience it all. And as God sent his Son FOR THAT PURPOSE, Jesus sends us to do the same. He says, “So I send you.”

I think this is a missional statement for us as the body of Christ. It means that we are called as God’s ambassadors, not just to throw money at projects or causes but to get our hands dirty and get blisters on our feet. When we involve ourselves in missions by simply writing a check, it is like standing on the safety of the shore shouting advice to a drowning person.

Last year, when Foothills Presbytery sponsored the Rise Against Hunger Event, I was so proud that our church, certainly not one of the largest churches in the Presbytery, sent one of the largest contributions. But I was even prouder when 34 people from this congregation showed up on a spring Saturday to help pack boxes of rice and grain to be sent to hungry people all over the world.

THAT is why Jesus says, “So I Send You!” Jesus taught us in his parables and miracles over and over again that we are to forgive the one who has the most sins. That we are to invite the ones to eat that we know can NEVER return the invitation. That we are to feed and clothe and visit the least of these. And in doing so, we share the Gospel, not knowing whether it will be believed, but assured that we are leaving an imprint of God’s grace every time we try.

There is a legend that I love to tell about Jesus in Heaven with the angels after his resurrection. They are looking down on earth, seeing all that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection has accomplished. The angel Gabriel says, “Lord that is so wonderful to see. But what will happen now that you have joined us here? How will your mission continue?”

Jesus replied: “I have quite a few faithful friends. I have commissioned them to continue the task. THEY will do they work. THEY will carry out the mission.” Gabriel replied, “That is wonderful Lord but, what happens is they fail? What is your back up plan?” Jesus said, “There is no back up plan.”

Friends, we are all that God has. And Jesus said, “So I send you”. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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