

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
Ash Wednesday
February 25, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

John 20:21-23

²¹ ***Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."*** ²² ***And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. "*** ²³ ***If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.***" (NIV)

Real Forgiveness, Here and Now

It had been a couple years ago already, but I'm sure the disciples remembered it well. Jesus was teaching in Capernaum, in a room packed with people. Some men wanted Jesus to help a friend who was paralyzed, but they couldn't get their friend, who was lying on a mat, past the crowd. Determined, they made a whole in the roof and lowered their paralyzed friend down in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw the man, he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Some teachers of the law were there, and they were incensed at Jesus and his audacity. "Who does this man think he is?" they thought. "How dare he forgive someone his sins? Only God can do that." But that was the point. Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God, on earth, in the flesh. To prove that he had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed the paralyzed man, enabling him to get up and walk.

"Your sins are forgiven"—what a statement! To tell people that Almighty God is not going to punish them for their sins—amazing that someone could say such a thing. But did the disciples of Jesus think that their days of hearing such astounding things were over? After all, Jesus had met with increasing opposition. The opposition had risen to a fever pitch, and Jesus had been killed, shamefully crucified on a Roman cross.

Some of the women they knew, however, claimed that Jesus was alive again and that they had seen him. Could it be true? Had Jesus returned from death? Was he going to come to them and once again be their teacher? Or was he angry at them for leaving him when he was arrested three nights before? Was he going to hold their sins against them? They huddled together in a locked room, afraid of those who had cried out for Jesus' blood, afraid of what would happen next, and perhaps afraid of what Jesus would do with them, his disloyal servants.

Then he appeared! Was it really Jesus? Here among them? It was; they saw him. It was Jesus; they heard him speak a familiar greeting—a greeting now imbued with new meaning, given the circumstances—"Peace be with you!" It was Jesus; they looked at his hands and his side.

And he spoke some more. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Do you understand what this meant? Jesus was not here to beat them into the ground and punish them for abandoning him. He was proclaiming peace to them, not punishment. And Jesus was not writing them off as his servants. Instead he was commissioning them to go out into the world on his behalf. These words from Jesus must have meant the world to these scared and guilty followers.

Still, they might have wondered if their days of hearing Jesus' forgiveness might come to an end. Would Jesus always be with them? Would he always be there when they sinned, to

rebuke them, to call them back, to forgive them? The Lord quickly answered their questions: And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Jesus breathed on his disciples, foreshadowing the sound of the wind that they would hear in fifty days, on the day of Pentecost. And Jesus gave to them—*them*, the ones who had turned their backs on him!—he gave them the Holy Spirit. Then he spoke amazing words: If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. Jesus was authorizing them to forgive people's sins. They had been forgiven; now they could forgive in Jesus' name.

That word "forgive" is maybe a little abstract for us. What Jesus is saying is that his people can send sins away. "To send away"—that's the background of the word "forgive". Maybe some of you remember the word that the King James Version uses, "remit". We see that word "remit" when we pay our bills. To remit a payment is to put it in the mail and send it off. And you can be sure that after you remit that money, you're never going to see it again! To remit or forgive sins is to send them away. Once sins are sent away, they can't damn us. They can't condemn us to hell. They can't kill us. They can't control us. They're gone. The ancient writer of the psalm said it, and it's true: ...as far as the east is from the west, so far has [the LORD] removed our transgressions from us.

Another word we use is "absolution". To absolve means to untie, to set free. When a ship gets underway and goes out to sea, someone on the dock unties it from its moorings, and away it goes. When sins are forgiven, they're untied from us and we are set free from them, absolved.

All this is based on what Jesus did. Jesus paid for the sins of the world when he died on his cross. You see, since Jesus took our sins on himself, he freed us from them. Since he died, we are set free from eternal death. To have our sins forgiven means to have the benefit of Jesus' work applied to us.

I said that the disciples might have wondered if they would ever again experience the wonder of seeing Jesus forgive people's sins. They would. They themselves would be the ones acting as Christ's ambassadors, his official representatives, forgiving people's sins. They could confess their sins and receive Christ's own forgiveness from the lips of a fellow Christian, and they could bring comfort to a troubled believer by forgiving them his sins. Real forgiveness, right there and then.

What about here and now? Can we, too, know the wonder of Jesus forgiving sins?

We can—real forgiveness, here and now. The same authority that Jesus gave to his disciples of long ago he has committed to Christians today. This means that when someone comes to you knowing that they are guilty, knowing that they have sinned, you can, with Christ's authority, forgive their sins. In the same way, if you are feeling guilty and troubled by something you have said or done, you can go to a fellow Christian, confess your sin, and hear them absolve you, that is, set you free from guilt in the sight of God. And because Jesus has promised it, you will have real forgiveness.

It's good to be reminded that this forgiveness is real. Notice that Jesus does not say, "If people come to you and confess their sins, wish them the best of luck." When you confess your sins to the pastor, he doesn't look at you and say, "Well, I think Jesus is pretty nice, so we can hope for the best... can't we?" No, this forgiveness that the minister pronounces is real; it's not just a wish. That's why, with the authorization of Jesus Christ, the pastor says, "I forgive you all your sins." The words of the hymn we sang sum it up, don't they? *"The words which absolution give are his who died that we might live; the minister whom Christ has sent is but his humble instrument. When ministers lay on their hands, absolved by Christ the sinner*

stands; He who by grace the Word believes forgiveness, sure and sweet, receives.” (Christian Worship 308:5,6)

Do you see why confession and absolution is such an important part of the Church's life? We don't confess our sins only to make ourselves feel better. Confession and absolution is not merely therapy for distressed souls. We come to God and confess our sins because God promises to actually forgive us. Jesus promises, using human beings as his representatives, to forgive us and set us free. We come at Jesus' own invitation, spurred on by his promise. We come needing to be set free—free from the damning “guilty” verdict that our sins bring with them. We come needing our sins to be sent away. And because of our Savior's wondrous love, we do not come in vain. Jesus meets our need, with real forgiveness, here and now.

Can we experience the wonder of Jesus forgiving sins? Yes. The crucified and risen Jesus still comes among us, speaking peace. Real forgiveness, here and now. That is his promise to you and me. Amen.