

John 20:19-23

It's Pentecost Sunday, a day when we celebrate the birth of the Church and the giving of the Holy Spirit, as our lesson from Acts 2:1-21 describes. But the Bible makes it clear that it was not just on that first Pentecost that the Holy Spirit was given. It happened to some in Old Testament times (Judges 6:34; 1 Samuel 11:6; 16:13). However, the Spirit was also given when the resurrected Jesus appeared on the first day of the week. What a perfect way to end the Easter season: by going back to the day the season began.

Early in the morning the women had gone to the tomb only to find it empty. They went and told the disciples and two of them raced to find an empty tomb. Mary Magdalene stayed back when the disciples left and spoke with the gardener who revealed himself to be Jesus. When she returned to the disciples and told them she had seen the risen Lord I don't think they believed her. Later that evening, when the disciples were in hiding, sad, afraid, confused, Jesus also came to see them. That was what we heard in our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus told them "Peace be with you." He showed them his hands and side and the disciples rejoiced in the risen Lord.

Then Jesus offered them another blessing of peace. In the ancient Hebrew culture offering a blessing of peace was offering a wish for "completeness"; for the total well-being of those being blessed. In the Greek form the gospel writer John uses it is a wish for complete harmony and agreement, a unity among all those who are being blessed. This is Jesus' wish for all who are his followers. Then he tells them he is sending them, as his Father sent him. Where? To tell the world about God's love and forgiveness. This too is Jesus' wish for all his followers. It is then that he breathes the power of his Spirit upon them. He is not sending them out without giving them the strength and power they need to do what he asks of them. According to the Gospel of John, the disciples had the power of the Holy Spirit before the day of Pentecost.

Then Jesus tells his disciples "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In the power of the Holy Spirit we are given the power of forgiveness. It's like Martin Luther and the fourth-century African theologian, Saint Augustine, said, "Forgiveness of sin is what the church is all about." Forgiveness is an aspect of Christian living. Jesus linked the Holy Spirit and forgiveness together; they are works of God.

During the Reformation, Martin Luther preached several sermons on the very gospel lesson that we heard on this Day of Pentecost. On two occasions, Luther tried to make very clear how God is involved in the forgiveness of our sin. He started by pointing out how Jesus approached the disciples on that first Easter in the locked house. It is how he approaches you and me today. When Jesus came to the disciples, Luther claimed, he showed them his hands and his feet, and then his side. This meeting the disciples had with Jesus that first Easter is like the way he comes to you and to me today. You see, Martin Luther contended, while preaching in Borna, Germany, in 1522, that "the Lord's hands and feet really signify nothing but his works ... And the showing of his side is nothing but the showing of his heart, in order that we may see how kind, loving and fatherlike his mind is toward us."

In another sermon preached over a decade later, probably just for family and houseguests, Luther elaborated on these points. Commenting on Jesus' appearance to the disciples that Easter evening, Luther pointed out that Christ does not wait for his disciples to go after him. In fact, he goes after them (and us) through locked doors. (You and I have a way of putting up locked doors for Jesus, don't we?) But Jesus breaks through those locked doors of our lives. And

when he comes, he comes in a warm friendly manner. That's what the offer of peace is all about.

Luther goes on to add that with this example Christ presents his heart, who he is and what kind of heart he bears to us. Christ treats his disciples and us so tenderly, not reproaching anyone for unbelief and sin. Instead he comforts, strengthens, and lifts them, and us, up. This was done for our good and comfort.

Isn't this a comforting word? You and I can be confident, certain of a loving God, because he keeps coming back. Jesus will not leave us alone. Our gospel lesson says that the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord Jesus (John 20:20). You and I can celebrate; his presence among you and me can make us happy! When you realize that God, that Jesus, takes the initiative in your life, then you better understand how the Pentecost message of the giving of the Holy Spirit can make a difference in your life, how forgiveness and life come easy. The Spirit is Christ's presence among us (Galatians 4:6; 1 Peter 1:11), and so forgiveness and the good works of life are his work. The giving of the Holy Spirit is about God giving us the power to do any good; the ability to do good comes from God. Jesus gave the disciples the Spirit by breathing on them; the Spirit is the breath of God!

We need the Spirit to do good just like we need the air we breathe to live. We need the Spirit in order to forgive. Forgiveness isn't always easy. Yet when we believe in Jesus and are filled with the Holy Spirit we understand it is not you or I who do the forgiving. It is all God's work. The Holy Spirit has the power to do all the forgiveness.

In another sermon on the same Gospel text, Martin Luther noted that only God himself has the power to forgive sins. That's good news, Luther claimed, because now we can be certain of our forgiveness. You can be certain of God's forgiveness, even if you are not quite sure that the one who says you're forgiven really meant it, because God gave it. When somebody says he or she forgave you, believe it! It's not theirs to give. The words of forgiveness are God's, even if the human speaker had some reservations. Take it as if God had spoken these words to you!

In the same 1540 sermon, Martin Luther went on to claim what a great treasure it is to hear that you are forgiven, since it is God forgiving us. That's a blessing for you and me when the opportunity is there for you or me to forgive the troublemaker and difficult person. Maybe we're not quite sorry enough, not quite sure we can forget along with the words of forgiveness. In this same sermon, Martin Luther reminds his hearers and us that our attitudes don't matter, because our attitude will never be sufficient. Forgiveness is God's work, not yours and mine!

I don't know about you, but that is a wonderful, freeing insight. It takes the pressure off us when it comes to our relationship with God and when it comes to our relationship with others. Forgiveness, like most things pertaining to God, is not a matter of feelings. Forgiveness depends on God; forgiveness is a work of the Holy Spirit whom Christ has already given to you and me. What a wonderful, freeing word. It takes the pressure off, makes life a little easier, a little more fun.

All glory be to God.