

The 2nd Sunday of Easter (C)
April 28, 2019
Text: John 20:19-31

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I got my very first real job, that I got paid for with a real check, when I was 16. I was hired to be the flag-football coach for the 7th and 8th grade boys at the Lutheran school that was part of the congregation I grew up in. It was great! It only took about an hour and a half each day. I got to be outdoors in the sunshine. It was physically active and fun throwing the football around with the kids. The only problem was: it paid \$1.60 an hour, which meant I was earning \$12 a week! Before taxes! I knew this definitely was not going to be a job I would stick with.

One of the themes in our Gospel story for today is the “job” that the risen Jesus gives his followers—and it is a job Jesus intends for them to stick with. It was the evening of Easter Day, and the risen Jesus appeared to his frightened, confused followers to give them a job would define them, both as individuals and as a community. The job, with a capital “J”, was to continue Jesus’ work of healing the human family through the work of forgiveness.

The human family finds itself in such a bind—on both the small, individual scale and the large, global scale. It seems there is always conflict going on somewhere, setting one person against another, one group against another, one nation against another. The interests or desires of one person or group are incompatible with another person’s or group’s interests or desires. And all too often, it seems all both sides can agree on is that the other is wrong, is impossible, is beyond redemption. It leads to contempt, hate, and violence.

Looking at the big picture like that, it’s so easy to simply become paralyzed, to believe that there is nothing anyone could ever do that would make a difference. And that’s why it’s important for us to spend some time with our Gospel story for today—because if there is anyone who has clarity of insight into the powers of estrangement and hate and violence, into our resistance to reconciliation and healing, it’s definitely Jesus. And Jesus seems to think, to know, that the human family is not a lost cause.

So before Jesus sends his followers to be agents of forgiveness and healing, he does two things. First, he forgives them. Remember, they were the ones who abandoned him in his time of need. So Jesus says to them, “Peace be with you.” There is no retribution or retaliation. No judgment or condemnation. Instead, peace be with you. As the one who had been wronged, as the one we might imagine having the right to pay it all back, Jesus makes it clear that retaliation ends with him. Judgment and condemnation end with him. Instead, there is only “Peace be with you.”

And then Jesus empowers them with the Holy Spirit, because this isn’t a job they could ever manage under their own power. Jesus breathes on them—although a better translation would be “breathes into them”—and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This is John’s way of picturing the meaning of Pentecost—God’s gift of the Spirit to empower God’s people—and John wants us to hear it as an echo of how, in the creation story from Genesis 2, God breathed the breath of life into us to make us living beings. What Jesus is doing is nothing less than the creation of a new human family, one that will live in peace and love, not with hate and violence. And how will this new life be spread? With forgiveness. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

This is “the Job” that Jesus gives to his followers. And this is the job that Jesus gives to us also. Whatever it is that you do to fill your days—whether you’re getting paid for it or not—your real job is to be part of God’s work to heal and renew the human family, to bring into being a humanity that will live with love and peace. And if it seems like too big a job, it is! But remember that Jesus doesn’t send us out to do this job on our own. We are filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is God’s own living presence in us and among us that makes it possible for us to do this job.

And if you’re wondering what this kind of world-changing activity looks like, let me tell you a couple of stories. The first story is about Mpho Tutu, a pastor and the daughter of Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. Some years ago, her peaceful, loving family life was shattered when she found her housekeeper, Angela, murdered in her own home. Angela was like a member of the family. In the book that Mpho wrote with her father about forgiving, she describes the horror of finding Angela’s body, and the ongoing grief and trauma it caused her family. In ways big and small, Angela’s death caused Mpho and her daughters to feel unsafe, to be immersed in sadness and loss, to keep going back to revisit little conflicts they had with Angela. And then, the family’s gardener was accused of the crime. In the book, Mpho describes her journey through the steps of forgiveness—first, how telling the story of what happened was an important step in coming to terms with the reality of it; second, how essential it was to name how Angela’s death had hurt her; how it was a long journey through shock and anger and grief, through confusion and guilt and sadness, until she arrived at the point of choosing forgiveness as the way to healing and freedom, the way to no longer be defined by this terrible event. Mpho forgave so that this incident would not be the main plot of their family’s life story. (Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*)

And if Mpho’s story gives a glimpse of what forgiveness looks like in families and personal relationships, her father’s story helps us imagine how forgiveness really does change the world. As the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu played a significant public role in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. He believes that if South Africa had tried to punish all the perpetrators of violence during the apartheid era, the result would have been explosive. The country would have been plunged into a bloodbath. But he also believes that if the country had pronounced blanket amnesty for everyone—in essence choosing a kind of national amnesia—there would have been such resentment and hate, that it would have eventually boiled over, resulting in more violence, more killing. In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, he describes the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, how people who had committed human rights crimes during the apartheid period would apply for amnesty. Then, they would appear before the commission to tell all they knew about people who had been tortured and killed, about bombings, about where people who had disappeared were buried. In return for their candor, they were granted amnesty. In this way, as a nation, South Africa stepped away from the path of punishment and retribution, and instead embraced the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. The course of the nation’s future—really, the world’s future—was changed by the decisions of individual people who chose forgiveness over retaliation—the way of life over the way of death.

And this is the job Jesus has for you, for me, for all of us together. Day by day, empowered by God’s Spirit, Jesus calls us to choose the way of forgiveness, the way of giving life. It’s not

simple. It requires that we intentionally commit ourselves to the way of healing, rather than following the inner urge to replay the harm done to us with more harm. And the steps are challenging. It requires recognizing our shared humanity; it requires finding a safe place to tell our story, and naming the hurt that was done to us. It may take a long time before we feel ourselves ready to forgive. This job that Jesus gives us is about mending the fabric of our life together. Forgiveness is how “we stop our human community from unraveling.” (*The Book of Forgiving*, p. 4) Unfortunately, you won’t get paid for this job, not even \$1.60 an hour. But you will find it to be a source of meaning, and purpose, and joy, and hope, and true freedom. Thanks be to God. Amen.