

April 7, 2024
John 20:19-31

Easter 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Community of Forgiveness”

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The Guild of Sacristans was one of the most prestigious and exclusive organizations at the Church of the Ascension. In most congregations, such groups are known as Altar Guilds, but this group chose the more esoteric title “sacristans,” which may be defined as “*officials in charge of the sacred vessels and vestments of a church or a religious house*” (Dictionary.com). The Guild looked after all the altar furnishings, communion ware, paraments, priestly vestments, and all matters associated with congregational worship. They were renowned for their reliability and precision; no one had to be concerned that any detail would be overlooked, or something would not be prepared for worship. The Guild was so prestigious that unlike other congregational committees and organizations a person did not volunteer to join the Guild; membership was by invitation only, and new members were required to undergo weeks of training and even pass an examination on the various altar furnishings, liturgical seasons and colours, and the proper way to set the altar for Holy Communion. Membership in the Guild was seen as a symbol of status and honour in a congregation that had a reputation as being the leading religious organization in the community.

This prestige and exclusivity were tested when one week the Communion liturgy was about to begin when a new member of the choir noticed that there was no wine in the cruet. Since he was sitting near the sacristy, he quietly retrieved the cruet during the offering hymn, filled it with wine, and replaced it before the pastor began the Great Thanksgiving. Everything seemed to have gone well – until a Guild member confronted him after the service and accused him of an “unauthorized violation,” since he was not a member of the Guild that had exclusive authority over all worship matters in the congregation. It did not matter that without his actions there might not have been wine for the Sacrament; in a congregation where the Guild had such exclusive authority, such an action by a non-Guild member was unthinkable.

Fortunately, I have never served a congregation with such a group that claims absolute authority over what they believe is their exclusive jurisdiction; the Altar Guilds in the congregations where I have been pastor have been faithful, dedicated,

generous people who have sought to serve our Lord and the worshipping community without needing to have such exclusive authority in their roles. Indeed, it is easy for persons in congregations to misunderstand what it means to serve in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ; what is meant to be a means of serve can easily become a path to prestige and authority over others. The lesson that our Lord taught his disciples, that they are to serve in the same manner in which *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45), is often forgotten in our human desire to create positions of prestige and exclusivity that place us in a higher echelon than others, even though all are equal because in Holy Baptism we are *“the Body of Christ and individually members of it”* (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Today’s Gospel lesson is the continuation of John’s account of the appearances of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples after his resurrection on Easter Day. Our Lord first appears to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside of the Tomb and instructs her to *“go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’* (John 20:17). When Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples to proclaim the good news that *“I have seen the Lord”* (20:18), she becomes the first person to proclaim the Easter gospel that is at the heart of our Christian faith, the good news that *“Christ the Lord is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”*

John’s account of the first Easter Sunday continues when he reports that *“it was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them”* (20:19). Those gathered are identified as “disciples” (*mathetou*); this gathering, like the farewell meal, included the Eleven (Judas Iscariot is no longer among them after his betrayal), but there is no indication that it was limited to this inner circle of followers. Instead, this gathering *“represents the faith community in general, not the apostolic leadership”* (Gail O’Day). As Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb *“while it was still dark”* (20:10, the disciples are gathered in the evening darkness, signifying the absence of Christ who is *“the light of all people”* (1:4). This darkness is compounded by their cowering behind locked doors *“because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities,”* fearing that they would suffer the same fate at the hands of the religious leaders who played a key role in Jesus’ crucifixion. But despite the locked doors and the fear that was keeping them in bondage, *“Jesus came and stood among them. He said, ‘Peace be with you.’”* In his Farewell Discourse, Jesus had promised this large gathering of disciples that they would see him again and would offer his gift of peace to a community that will experience the world’s hatred and persecution:

- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” – 14:27.
- “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, you will see me.” – 16:16.
- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

Those who will face persecution and suffering can do so with the peace of Jesus, the gift of *shalom* that is “*the eschatological reconciliation between God and his people*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*). The risen Jesus gives his disciples the gift of his peace (*Eirene*) which drives away their fear, for he incorporates them into communion with the Father. Through the cross and resurrection, Christ has conquered the world and its ruler, and has made his disciples “*children of God*” (1:12). There is, then, no reason for his disciples to fear.

- “The presence of Jesus among his disciples provides the reassurance they need. In the middle of their fear, Jesus speaks of peace. ‘Peace be with you’ is his address to his followers. It is rooted in the Jewish concept of *shalom*, an attribute often associated in Hebrew literature with God.” – Michael Joseph Brown.

After appearing to his disciples and greeting them with the words of peace, Jesus “*showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy*” (20:20). The wounds on Jesus’ risen body indicate that the body resurrected to glory is the same one that died on the cross; “*the wounds on Jesus’ resurrected body reveal that he is forever fixed in the act of love in which he died*” (Curtis Martin and William Wright). The disciples’ joy, like the end of Mary’s weeping in the presence of the risen Jesus (20:16), is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that the disciples’ pain will turn to joy when they see him again (“*Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy*” – 16:20).

- “Whenever in such fear we cry to God, God cannot refrain from helping us. Just as Christ did not stay long outside, away from his frightened disciples, but soon was there comforting them and saying, ‘Peace be with you, I have come, be of good cheer and do not be afraid,’ so it is still. When we are afraid, God lifts us up and causes the gospel to be preached to us and thus restores to us a glad and sure conscience.” – Martin Luther, 1526.

After the disciples' fear is turned into joy at the appearance of the risen Lord, "*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.'*" (20:21). Jesus' repeated greeting is not simple a repetition of his earlier greeting of peace; the disciples can receive Jesus' words as the gift of peace and not simply as a traditional greeting only after they recognize that the person who speaks to them is "the Lord." These words are now an introduction to Jesus' commissioning his disciples to continue his work in the world, fulfilling the words of his prayer that "*as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*" (17:18). Jesus' words that "*as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you*" (20:21b) connects the coming apostolic ministry of the disciples with Jesus' ministry as the one sent by God to God's people:

- "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." – 3:17.
- "But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me." – 5:36.
- "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." – 17:3.

The fellowship of Jesus' disciples, the Church, is commissioned to be the extension of the work of the Father and Son in the world. Jesus empowers them to fulfill this mission when "*he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'*" (20:22-23). The gift of the Holy Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus' work. The Holy Spirit that had been promised to Jesus' followers after his glorification is now bestowed on them by the one who is glorified through his death and resurrection:

- "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified." – 7:37-39.

The verb "to breathe" (*emphysao*) only occurs here in the New Testament, evoking the description of God's breathing the breath of life into the first human in Genesis and the description of the breath of life in Ezekiel:

- “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” – Genesis 2:7.
- “Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” – Ezekiel 37:9.

Jesus’ breathing the Holy Spirit on the disciples thus is described as a new, second creation; *“the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains that new life.”* (O’Day).

The reception of the Holy Spirit is followed by Jesus’ bestowing the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation on the faith community: *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* (20:23). “Sin” (*hamartia*) in the Fourth Gospel is described as a theological failing, not a moral or behavioural transgression; to have “sin” is to be blind to the revelation of God (*“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind”* – 9:39). To forgive sins is to share in Jesus’ work of opening the eyes of the blind to see the glory of God present in the crucified and risen Lord, as *“Jesus brings people to judgment by his revealing work and presence in the world”* (O’Day). This work of forgiveness and reconciliation is entrusted to the entire faith community in John, unlike in Matthew where it is addressed only to those who will be apostolic leaders in the church (*“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* – Matthew 16:19). Forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus’ work in the world. Jesus commissions the community to continue to the work of making God in Jesus known to the world and thereby to bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment about sin. The community of disciples is to continue what God sent Jesus to do.

- “By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world; by revealing God to the world, the church makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. The faith community’s mission, therefore, is not to be the arbiter of right or wrong, but to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus.” – O’Day.

The commission to be a community of forgiveness is a task that the Lutheran Church has taken seriously since the Reformation. Martin Luther connects confession and forgiveness with the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, in which we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Through water and the Word, we believe that Holy Baptism *“brings about*

forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it” (Small Catechism). Because of the human condition in which we continue to sin and fall short of the glory of God, we are called to come to God in confession believing that “if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). When we hear the words of forgiveness spoken by the pastor, we are to believe that these words spoken by a human being are “from God himself and by no means [are we to] doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.” (Small Catechism).

The proclamation of the forgiveness of sins is one of the tasks our church has entrusted to those who have been called and ordained to the Office of Word and Sacrament, connected with our understanding of such ministry as the “office of preaching,” the spoken and visible gospel that mediates God’s gracious forgiveness through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus without whom no person can be saved. The ministry of the gospel “*creates, maintains, and guards the church in its mission to be the proleptic community of God’s new world, in the interim between the day of Jesus’ ascension and the time of his final return*” (Augsburg Confession). As the church entrusts its ordained pastors with the faithful proclamation of the gospel and administration of the Sacraments, so also are pastors entrusted with the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins that Christ entrusts to the whole church. When a pastor pronounces absolution in worship, it is always with the understanding that it is as “*a called and ordained minister of the church of God and by his authority, I declare to you the forgiveness of all your sins.*” Persons called to ordained ministry are exercising the call that all Christians receive in baptism; there is no difference between clergy and laypeople in our common call to be a community of forgiveness, authorized by our risen Lord to share the gift of forgiveness rooted in his death and resurrection with all persons:

- “There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between the religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, are all truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.” – Martin Luther.

One of the common misunderstandings of ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church is that clergy have a “higher” calling than other members of the Church, a status that places them in a superior position over others. While the call to ordained ministry is one that has shaped my life and a call I take with the utmost seriousness, it is an abuse of this office to use it to gain superior status over others or to claim that which Christ entrusted to the whole church as our exclusive domain. Forgiveness is not a

task that only members of the “guild” can practice; it is the call of the whole church which is instituted by Christ to be a community of forgiveness.

- “Life therefore needs to be lived in an ongoing process of confession and forgiveness. This is the ongoing dynamic of community. The demons lose their power when we confess that we been in their clutches. The more deeply we confess, the more we will experience the forgiving love of God – and the more deeply we will realize how much more we have to confess. Community life encourages this confession of our demons and our enchantment with them, so that the love of God can reveal itself. Only in confession will the Good News be revealed to us, as the New Testament with its focus on sinners makes clear.” – Henri Nouwen.

The incident over who was “authorized” to fill the wine cruet for Communion soon became a major topic of conversation throughout the Church of the Ascension. While everyone respected the work of the Guild of Sacristans and their dedication to the congregation’s worship life, it had become apparent that what was meant to be a means of service had become an instrument of status and control. The Guild had long conversations with the pastor and Congregational Council, and after much deliberation and prayer announced that they were confessing that they had misused the trust placed in them for their own selfish gains and asked forgiveness from those they had wronged. Membership requirements were dropped, and the Guild became open to all who wanted to join in their work. While it was a hard adjustment, their openness to the participation of others reminded them that the work of the church in all its ministries is entrusted to them by our risen Lord Jesus Christ, who empowers the entire faith community to be a community that proclaims the forgiveness that is at the heart of the Gospel, in which we are born anew to a living hope through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – he who is Lord of all. Amen