

“A Word of Peace”

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...
If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (*John 20:21, 23*).

In his book “Mere Christianity,” C. S. Lewis makes an important observation about Jesus. He writes, “We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. (If) you tread on my toe...I forgive you; (if) you steal my money...I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men’s toes and stealing other men’s money?” We would say that this man was either ignorant or a fool. “Yet this is exactly what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He...behaved as if He was...the person chiefly offended in all (sins).” And then Lewis concludes, “This makes sense only if (Jesus) really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.”

Of course, this is *exactly* the truth about the forgiveness of sins that Christ won for us, and in today’s Gospel lesson, we hear this straight from the mouth of Jesus. Jesus said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (John 20:21, 23). In these words from the risen Christ, we hear Jesus giving instructions to His disciples, and we find what amounts to a job description for the Church, and the directives given to the disciples on that first Easter are the same ones He gives to us today: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.”

You see, the job of the Church is to deliver God’s forgiveness! The importance of this truth cannot be overstated, and this proclamation of forgiveness is absolutely essential to the existence of the Church. In fact, every Gospel writer makes this point. In Mark, Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news” (Mark 16:15). And following His resurrection in Luke 24, Jesus reminded His disciples that the Messiah was to “suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and (then) repentance and forgiveness of sins (would) be preached in his name to all nations.”

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached. That’s the commission of Christ! That’s the job of the church! And, even though this task may seem simple, this basic job description from Jesus deals with our most dire need. From the blatant and willful wrongs we have done to others, to the offenses of which we are completely unaware, our sin has ruined us. It has removed us from fellowship with God, it has divided us from each other, and it has separated us from life. At its root, sin is the essence of all human problems, and it is something we have no power to control or conquer on our own. It is the reason we worry. It is the reason we suffer. It is the reason we die. *It is also the reason Jesus came.*

Jesus Christ came to earth as a human being, took responsibility for our most basic and serious problem, suffered separation from God, from others, and from life itself, and He did all of these things so that we could be forgiven – not only of the sins we have blatantly and willfully done to others, but even for the sins of which we are completely unaware! Because of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! This is why Jesus came, it’s what His words “Peace be with you” mean...*and sharing this message is precisely the call He has given to His Church.*

The job description seems clear enough, but how do we do this? How can we, as sinful, flawed, unforgiving human beings, be involved in communicating this divine message of God’s perfect love and forgiveness? Believe it or not, the answer to this question starts right here. You see, the forgiveness of sins is given through worship. I have often heard people say, “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” And even though you may be able to debate this statement, it shows a complete misunderstanding of what happens in worship.

The truth is that when we think about worship, we often see it as something *we* are doing for God. Like everything else in life, we automatically put ourselves at the center of the story. But when we view worship as something *we* do, we completely miss the point, and we overlook the incredible thing that God is doing for us and to us and in us when we gather around His Word and Sacraments. You see, at its core, worship is never about what *we* are doing for God! Instead, it is first and foremost about what *God* is doing for us! To put it very simply, in worship, God delivers His forgiveness. Through God's Word, whether it's spoken by a pastor or sung by the congregation, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and delivered, and in the Sacraments, God's forgiveness is bestowed on us in intimately personal ways. When He speaks to us through His Word and when He personally deals with us in the miracle of His Sacraments, He is actively leading us to repentance, He is giving us the gift of full forgiveness, and He is strengthening us to make a difference in the world. And that difference starts in our relationships with each other.

My friends, God is relational, and just as His forgiveness has been shared with us in personal ways, it is also meant to be shared personally. The Bible is not a collection of intellectual truths to be learned, disciplines to be mastered, or a puzzle to be solved. It is God's love letter to the world, it is always personal, and it is also meant to be shared in the most personal ways and not only on Sunday mornings. It happens when we eat together as a family. It happens when we work through conflicts together. It happens when we serve together. It happens when we care for each other. It happens when we talk about our own life stories of faith and forgiveness. *It happens when we bring each other a word of peace!*

When the demands and anxieties of life overwhelm us, we often turn on the people closest to us, and the wounds we inflict on each other by our selfish words and actions can be profound. But today God tells us that we are forgiven for *all* of our sins and, as the Holy Spirit works on us through the Word, God also enables us to see our sin clearly and to be honest with each other and to repent to one another *and to be reconciled*. Forgiveness must be shared in and through our relationships, and my friends, when we forgive each other, relationships are restored, and we are doing the job of the Church.

In today's Gospel reading from John, we see this personal application of the forgiveness demonstrated in a beautiful and moving manner. We are told in the first verse of the reading that the disciples were together, with the doors locked for "fear of the Jews." Just hours before, these followers of Jesus had watched their friend suffer an unimaginable and humiliating death, and they had done nothing to help him; they had shown him no support or compassion. In fact, they had done just the opposite. These men were wracked with guilt and shrouded in shame, and it's to these poor, broken, cowardly men that Jesus appeared. And His first words changed everything: "Peace be with you!" By human standards, He had every reason to forsake these men who had so quickly forsaken Him. By human standards, He had every reason to condemn, if not avenge, their abandonment in His greatest hour of need. But Jesus doesn't deal with them by human standards. Instead of rebuke or revenge, Jesus offers a word of peace. He proclaims forgiveness. He announces absolution. And He restores them to a right relationship with God...and that is exactly what Jesus does for us as well.

Through Christ's blood, God has "forgiven our sins and cleansed us from all unrighteousness." Through the waters of Holy Baptism, He has given us "rebirth and renewal" by His Holy Spirit. And through His Word He has given us a very clear job description: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (John 20:33). The job God has given His church – the job He has given us – is to share the same forgiveness that Christ has so graciously given because, through this word of peace, God creates faith; and through this word of peace, disciples are made; and through this word of peace, God's Kingdom comes. And, my friends, when you forgive others in the name of Jesus, you are truly doing the job of the Church. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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