

2 Easter (C)

Jn 20.19-31

Forgive and forget: that's the Christian way, isn't it? "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us," and once we're forgiven God forgets our sins entirely, right? Just like they never happened. And that's what we should do, too; forgive others as we have been forgiven, and then act like it never happened.

But maybe not. Maybe that's not the Christian way. Maybe the Christian way is to forgive, but never to forget. Maybe there is an inextricable link between forgiveness and remembering. That, I think, may be one of the lessons that this morning's gospel has for us.

It may not seem as if the primary theme of this story from John's gospel has much to do with forgiveness. Taken as a whole, this story seems to have more to do with belief, and we usually read this story as if its primary purpose is to give us an example of how to be faithful. Thomas doubts, Jesus appears, Thomas no longer doubts, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This is a story about faith, a story about having the kind of faith that enables us to see the risen Lord even if he's not physically present.

That is indeed one way of reading this story, but I think there's something else here that suggests there is an intrinsic relationship between forgiveness and memory. Yes, there is that very important and rather provocative bit about "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them, [and] if you retain the sins of any they are retained." But that's not the part I have in mind; I'm going to have to save that for another day. Today I want to focus on memory and the way memory functions in the exercise of real forgiveness.

The thing that testifies to the connection between memory and forgiveness are the wounds of Jesus. In both the first half and the second half of today's gospel, it is the scars on the

body of the risen Lord that are especially significant.

When Jesus first appears, he shows the disciples his hands and his side, his *wounded* hands and his torn side. The next time he appears, he says to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side.” John is not the only gospel to make this point. In Luke’s account of the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and says, “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself.”

In the first half of the story, Jesus bestows on the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the second half of the story, Jesus makes a point about the nature of true faith. In both stories, it is the wounds of Jesus that makes these things possible. There’s an intimate connection between the scars he carries, the gift of the Spirit, and the exercise of faith.

It could have been different; in fact, it’s kind of odd that it’s not. If God was able to raise Jesus from the dead, you’d think he could’ve made sure the marks of the crucifixion were healed. Seems like it would have been an even greater testimony to the power of God and his victory over death if the resurrected body of Jesus had carried no scars whatsoever.

But he didn’t, and that’s what gets us to the importance of memory. The cross would not be forgotten. The suffering and the death of the incarnate Word would not be relegated to the past; they would be eternal. The resurrection did not mean that God was going to act as if the cross never happened.

But—and here’s the part that makes all the difference—God was not going to remember the cross for the purpose of holding it over our heads. God determined to remember the cross for the sake of remembering—and enabling *us* to remember—the love that drove Jesus to the cross in the first place.

When the body of the Lord was raised from death to new life, it was put back together

and re-membered in a way that retained something of the pattern of its previous existence. When the Lord appeared to his disciples, he brought the memory of the cross with him, inscribed on his very body. When he returned to the Father with a human nature that had been fully sanctified and redeemed, he took with him the memory of the brokenness and the pain of this world. When he sat down at the right hand of God and took up his authority as the one who would rule over all things on behalf of the Father, he did so mindful of everything he had endured for the sake of his creation. The wounds of God are eternal; Jesus will carry those scars throughout all time and beyond.

Now, what does all of that have to do with forgiveness? Well, what would it mean if God *did* forgive and forget? It would mean he would be a god who could not be faithful: he would not only forget the wrong, he would forget the forgiveness. He would forget that he has made us his children and that we are his adopted sons and daughters, brothers and sisters of the one whose death and resurrection binds us to him. The memory of the cross is an essential element in the on-going mercy and grace that God gives to us through his Word and Spirit.

When *we* remember some wrong someone has done to us, what happens to our memory of that wrong? It gets twisted, doesn't it? It gets magnified and distorted and exaggerated. It even starts to affect the way we remember other things. Like a virus working its way through our mind, it can slowly but surely poison every memory we have. Ultimately, we don't even remember why we're so bitter; we only remember that it's very important that we stay angry.

Thanks be to God that God does not remember the way we remember. When God remembers the wrong we have done, he does so for the purpose of remembering the mercy and the grace he has given us. God remembers precisely because by remembering he makes his mercy and his grace permanent and eternal. His memory is not subject to distortion or

exaggeration; he remembers exactly what happened, because the memory of it has been inscribed on the body of his Son for all eternity.

When we hold on to the memory of an injury, we approach the ones who hurt us with our defenses raised; we don't go near the ones who have hurt us without our armor on and our weapons already drawn. But because God remembers differently than we do, he does not come to us with armor on and weapons drawn. He comes to us and says, "Peace; peace be with you." Peace to you, you who gave me these scars. I remember you, and because I remember you I know that you have been forgiven and I know that you are loved.

It is because God remembers differently than we do that we can begin to remember the same way he does. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples? "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

One of the gifts God gives to us in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a new way of remembering, a new kind of memory. He gives us a chance to remember in a way that does not lead to suspicion and enmity and hatred. He gives us a chance to remember in a way that reminds us because we have been forgiven, we can forgive. Because we have been shown mercy, we can show mercy. Because we have received grace, we can offer grace.

What this means is that we can forgive, but we can never forget. We must remember. We must remember, not so we can prolong the hurt and the suffering and hold it over the ones who hurt us, but so that we can remember that we have forgiven them, that we have offered them mercy and peace. If we try to forget—if we fail to remember the way Christ remembered—then we will not be able to say "Peace be with you" when we encounter those who hurt us.

But in order to do this, we have to remember the way Jesus remembers. And that's hard,

because it means carrying our scars. But when we remember this way our scars are no longer open wounds. Left to ourselves, our memories never heal; they just continue to bleed. But when we receive the grace that Christ has for us, the bleeding stops and the wounds are closed. The wounds become emblems of grace; they become signs of the grace and the power that has overcome the hurt and the pain that they first caused.

It's hard to be an agent of grace to someone who has injured you. But that's the image we have in this morning's gospel: Jesus returns to his disciples, the ones who had betrayed him, who deserted him in his hour of need, the ones for whom he died, and says to them, "Peace be with you."

Christ comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." And when he does, he invites us to serve as agents of his grace, to remember in a way that heals rather than injures, to remember in a way that releases the power of the Holy Spirit. As he was sent by the Father, so we have been sent by him, and if we forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. God has given us this power so that the world might come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing might have life in his Name. Amen.

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