

John 20:19-23, 30-31

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:19-23, 30-31

In Christ Chapel at Southern Seminary you will find these words engraved in the marble wall behind the pulpit,

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

quite appropriate for that particular setting where over the years thousands of pastors and deacons from many denominations

have been trained and sent as Jesus was sent to reveal to the world the inexhaustible love of God.

I dare say every sanctuary in the Christian Church could display this passage as a reminder of why we gather here,

to be sent.

It is from the sanctuary, from worship you are sent, and it is the Father who does the sending from each worship service.

But you are not sent alone.

His Spirit goes with you.

This is an important part of the point of our Easter gathering.

Typically as people approach Easter, and then afterwards as they reflect on the day, it is viewed or interpreted as a wonderfully inspiring opportunity to worship together,

to celebrate the gift of life God has given us through the suffering and death in the passion of Christ,

to experience the presence of God in the full church,

with inspirational music, beautiful flowers

and the living spirit that gives power to the day
and the gathering

But is that worship experience all there is?

Is that all there was to that first Easter when Jesus entered
the closed and locked room where the disciples hid out of
fear they too would be crucified?

The purpose in Jesus' appearance to the disciples was about
more than proving His resurrection to His doubting disciples.

It was about sending the disciples out into the world to tell
the story having been empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' own words let us know this.

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

“Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of
any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of
any, they are retained.

What changed the disciples from fearful followers of Jesus to
fearless witnesses of His resurrection for the world?

Peace be with you...receive the Holy Spirit.

The power of Jesus' words changed many lives throughout His
ministry; healing lepers, restoring sight to the blind,

stopping a hemorrhage, casting out a demon (even legions
of demons),

forgiving sin,

and now giving the disciples peace and breathing the
Holy Spirit upon them

We can take some clues from this first Easter

John O'Day, in his commentary on the gospel of John says,

“...the faith community is to be a people shaped by Jesus’ gift of the Spirit,

and the mark of that gift will be the power to forgive or retain sins

I would add that an additional mark of that gift is the power to go out into the world,

as uncomfortable and difficult as it may be, to be the witness of Jesus’ resurrection, and love for the world and each person in it.

The disciples received that Spirit as it was breathed on them by Jesus himself.

After that they could not stay behind those closed and locked doors, afraid of what would happen to them.

They were sent to reveal God’s love for the world, particularly expressed in the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ.

They were sent and given the power to forgive and retain sins.

It was through the power of the spirit that Peter and the 11 disciples were able to do what they did on that day recorded in our Acts reading for this weekend

They stood before the city of Jerusalem and reminded the people who Jesus was,

“...Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did

through him among you, as you yourselves know—
this man,

handed over to you according to the definite plan
and foreknowledge of God,

then reminded them of what they did to him,

“who you crucified and killed by the hand of
those outside the law.”

And then told them the good news of what God had
done,

“But God raised him up, having freed him from
death, because it was impossible for him to be
held in its power...of this all of us are witnesses.”

The people asked, “What should we do?” and Peter said,
“Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus so your sins may
be forgiven;

and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all
who are faraway, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to
him.

Three thousand were baptized that day

You have received that same Holy Spirit in your baptism,

the same calling to go out and tell the story,

the same power to forgive and retain.

When many people hear about this power to forgive and retain
sins, it is often interpreted as the power to forgive and retain the
moral, hurtful sins of others.

But like all things associated with Jesus there is another perspective that is not so obvious.

On that night when Jesus spent the evening with His disciples sharing their last meal together he shared a couple of other things with them,

one of which we read about in the 13th chapter of John.

He commanded them to love one another as He has loved them.

If we try to understand the power to forgive and retain sins in light of Jesus' command to love

we begin to understand our mission and the mission of the church a little better.

O'Day goes on to say that

“By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world

...makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of un-limitless love

...in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God...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.

We are to do what Jesus did.

Go as Jesus sends, love as Jesus loves, bring forgiveness into the world.

When you were baptized it is likely the pastor said these words to you:

“Child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

This became your life in that moment. It described who you are and whose you are,

a child of God

The prayer from that point in your life was that as you grew and were taught the bible stories and about how Jesus loves you,

you came to understand that you too are sent into the world to bear witness to God’s love in Jesus Christ that you had received,

telling those stories you learned at home, in Sunday School and VBS,

sharing the stories of your own encounters with God,

sharing God’s grace with the world.

You have that power just like the disciples did to go out into the world telling the story of Jesus’ sacrifice of love and His resurrection,

to share God’s inexhaustible love for the world expressed in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus comes here each time we gather, and as we gather says,

“Peace be with you.”

That is the peace you share with one another.

Then at the end of every service with different words, you are sent;

Go in peace, share the good news! Today the words may be different, but the message is the same,

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And you respond, “Thanks be to God!”

I am not sure you realized that you were thanking God for sending you out to do the things I have just talked about.

I have learned, especially during our Lenten services, that you can't seem to leave until you have said those words, “Thanks be to God.”

It might be wise to make sure you understand what you are saying and take those words seriously if you are going to say them.

Otherwise they are meaningless lies.

God has loved you with all he has.

So, go and love the world so the world knows God loves them too.

Amen