



Pentecost depicted at www.revlisad.com

It's the 2nd time we've heard this passage from John Chapter 20 in the last 6 weeks. The theologians who compiled our Lectionary have us read this on the 1st Sunday after Easter Day, and again on Pentecost. So, the Easter Season begins and ends with this same passage from John's Gospel. Hmm...Do you think it might be important???

When Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples happens in John 20, it's not exactly their finest hour. It's the 1st day of the week, The Lord's Day, which was for the early church a day of triumph. The 1st day of the week became the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection, in the gathering together for the

Eucharistic Feast. This 1st day was meant to be a day of joyous victory. But that's not at all what's going on here. In John 20, far from a day of joy and triumph, these disciples were cowering quietly and fearfully together in a certain house with doors locked for fear of the Jews. We get an impression of these 11 men and the other men, women, and children who were with them – we get the impression of these disciples meeting in a darkened, secret place with doors barred and windows shuttered, terribly frightened that someone might learn of their gathering and break-in to do them grievous harm. Not exactly a picture of people filled with faith, and courage, and conviction, is it?

And when Jesus appears among them defying the laws of nature by miraculously travelling through walls to stand in their midst, when Jesus stands right there among them, face to face with them, he has to actually show them the scars in his hands, and the terrible wound in His side in order to make them believe. Why, they're so slow in the uptake, they're so slow in believing it's really Him standing there that Jesus has to give them His traditional greeting of "Peace be with you" not just once but three different times, before they start to lose their fear and finally grasp hold of who it is that's talking to them.

I've said it before. What a bunch of losers! Why, these men – these doubting, fearful, hesitant, tenuous, timorous men are not really so very different from you or me, are they? Yet look what a commission is placed upon the hunched and trembling shoulders of these fearful few. Jesus proclaims here that just as the Father sent the Christ into the world to redeem it, so the Christ sends them. He sends these disciples to that same end, toward the same challenges, and – and here's the incredible thing – Christ sends these fearful and trembling disciples into the world with His same **authority**. Jesus confers upon this quaking band of misfits the mission of His church, and He gives them the same power and authority that He himself had. "Just as the Father sent me, so I send you." (Jn.20:21) Is there any doubt what happens next? He breaths on them. Matthew Henry writing some 400 years ago notes how very like God's breathing life into Adam is this scene from John 20, where Jesus breathes life into his disciples, the breath of a new life; of abundant life; of eternal life.

But this breath of the Holy Spirit is not the Old Testament breath of God's wrath and judgment. No, this new breath of this new life in the Holy Spirit is the breathing in of infinite grace and abundant mercy. That is what happens to those who do indeed inhale this wonderful breath of the Holy Spirit of God.

Finally, at the end of the Gospel reading we come to another of those earth-splitting proclamations. In verse 23 of John Chapter 20, Jesus tells His disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven...." In modern counseling sessions – for example in teaching people how to conduct themselves in a job interview – you often hear that people need to develop confidence and a sense of "empowerment." I find it strange that so many people are desperately searching for this mental and emotional state, when this sense of empowerment is so clearly present through the Gospel.

When Jesus tells his disciples that they have the authority to forgive sin, what Christ is doing here is nothing short of giving His disciples the same authority over sin as that of God himself. This has perhaps gotten lost to modern ears, but I ask you to remember back with me to that point in Mark Chapter 2, and Luke Chapter 5, and Matthew Chapter 9, I ask you to recall that wonderful account when Jesus performed his early miracle of healing the paralytic, the man paralyzed from birth, the one who Jesus made pick up his pallet and walk. But please remember that what actually astounded the Pharisees even more than the miracle of healing the man from his physical disability – the thing that really dumbfounded the teachers of the Law was that Jesus said first, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” Because, those Pharisees knew that the only one in the universe who could forgive sins was God himself. So, in the passage this morning from John 20, the incredible thing which is happening here is that Jesus is giving His disciples that same authority – Our Lord is conferring upon His disciples the authority over sin, a power held by God himself. You want to talk about a sense of power? Now that’s empowerment!!!

The power of forgiveness has always been a key focus of the Gospels. Let’s review our course of “Christian Prayer, 101,” where Jesus first taught the Disciples how to pray in Matthew Chapter 6. You’ll note that the main focus is on forgiveness. Oh, we often forget this, but the concluding and key point Jesus makes in The Lord’s Prayer is that if we are not willing to forgive, we shouldn’t count on that kind of treatment from The Father. (See Mt.6:14-15) And in John 20, the power of forgiveness Jesus describes is astonishing. The sense of the original language in Jn.20:23 which uses the perfect tense, is that if you grant forgiveness to someone, then “their sins have already been forgiven.” There is a sense here that **real** forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness which happens only through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; **that** kind of forgiveness is so strong in a relationship that it bequeaths on the one receiving such mercy a state in which the slate is completely cleansed,

It’s as though forgiving really **is** forgetting. And since, God is not bound by anything as paltry as human time, this state of mercy already exists in its full and glorious measure. It only requires to be recognized This, you see, is true restoration.

But here’s also a sobering element to this declaration of forgiveness that Jesus makes in John Chapter 20 when He breathes the Holy Spirit into those in his inner circle. While his promise is that our earnest forgiveness results in true remedy in the lives of those who have wronged us, the results of withholding the hand of forgiveness are less particular and much more wide-reaching. Because Jesus says simply that “If we withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” And from whom exactly is this blessing withheld? Well, the verse doesn’t actually specify that. And I believe this is not accidental – by the way, I don’t there’s anything accidental about God’s Word. For me, God’s warning here is that if we withhold mercy from anyone, we are withholding that blessing from ourselves as well. There is so much joy to be had in the act of forgiveness, and that joy often is most deeply felt in the one who actually **grants** pardon. When you hear me say every single Sunday, “Remember the words of Our Lord how He said it is more blessed to give than to receive,” maybe it wasn’t just greenbacks Jesus was talkin’ about. Maybe he’s talking about another kind of currency as well, the currency of forgiveness, and yes, in that economy it’s true: It **is** more blessed to give than to receive.

Today is Pentecost. I believe these last ten days that tie together the Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost need to be seen against the backdrop of Jacob’s ladder. I talked a little on Wednesday night of how Pentecost is the “anti-Babel” in salvation history. With the Tower of Babel, man tried to raise himself to heaven, to exalt himself to the level of God. Oh, and by the way, that particular building project, sadly, is still very much in progress in much of this prideful, competitive, self-absorbed world. But, with Pentecost, God has provided a portion of his exalted person to be breathed upon and spread abroad in his world through those who come to believe in and accept the Lordship of Jesus. We all yearn for transcendence, to overcome the fleeting physical limitations of this earthbound, mortal vale of tears.

Every soul wants to fly not crawl. And there's a reason for that. Do you really think God would have created for himself a world-full of people who long to soar in this life without somehow providing for us the Spiritual and emotional wings to do so? The transcendent yearning to fly away and be with God is as natural to you and me as breathing. And the wonderful thing about that amazing dream at the beginning of the history of salvation was that in Jacob's vision, there was a ladder, this stairway connecting earth to heaven with angels flowing up and down on it. And at the top of that ladder, getting ready to bring his heaven down to his children is none other than The Lord God. He's always planned to bring his reign to all of those who believe.

Last week we talked about Jesus' ascension to his place of divine Kingship. But that Ascension Day could not have taken place without incarnation. Among the features which differentiate The Way from other great world religions is that in Christianity, fulfillment in this life has nothing to do with ascending to a higher level (which was in fact the main objective of Babel). For the Christian, salvation is neither an escape to Nirvana, nor climbing heaven's tower. Our salvation has nothing to do with man rising to heaven, and everything to do with heaven coming down to earth.

Last week, I reminded our Confirmands how if the 1st Person of the Trinity, The Father, is the Author of Creation, and the 2nd Person of the Trinity, the Son, is the Agency of Creation – He by and through whom all things were created that are created – then in addition to the Author of Creation, and the Agency of Creation, we have the 3rd person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Will of Creation. And today, that divine will of which only a mustard seed's portion is enough to move mountains – today none-other than the Divine Will which hovered over the void of the deep before time was time, the will that enabled the Author of Creation through the Agency of Creation to bring creation into being, today that Divine Will has come to dwell among us, and mighty indeed is he, an unquenchable fire that tests, and purifies, and tempers the child of God into a mighty instrument to build God's reign.

Yes, today is Pentecost. Today is the day when God's people receive a new life, lived in community, where every believer from distant corners of a far-flung world is able to hear the Gospel preached in a language he or she can understand. Because of Pentecost, the curse of Babel has been lifted, and now by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the Will of creation, we can truly begin to live together as a holy family.

Today is Pentecost. Today is the day when God's people are sent that glorious gift basket from 1st Corinthians 12, with the Holy Spirit's blessings of wisdom, and knowledge, and faith, and healing, and the working of miracles, and prophecy, and discernment, and tongues. Today is the day when, by the Power of the Holy Spirit, we can really be in full community, and each one of us can make his or her unique and blessed contribution.

But most importantly, today is Pentecost. Today is breathed into each of us a new kind of life, a life of abundance. We are able, through the power of the Holy Spirit of God, to love each other truly as Christ loved us. Because today, we are finally able to forgive each other for all those things that flesh is heir to. Today is the day when by the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I can truly remove as far as the east is from the west all the hurts that would divide us and tear us down. Because of today, because of Pentecost, by the Power of the Holy Spirit we can truly be family, the family of God whose reign has come down to be among us. What a day! What a joy! What a Lord!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Blessed Pentecost JWB+ 6/01/17