

HOMILY FOR APRIL 6-7, 2013 THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Last Saturday and Sunday, we joyfully and exuberantly celebrated the resurrection of Jesus who at this time entered fully into his identity as the Christ. No longer mortal, he was unrestricted by the constraints of time and space. We don't know what his resurrected presence was like. What we do know, though, is that the resurrected life of Jesus was not the same life he had lived until his death on Calvary. His wounds showed that he was the same person who had moved among them in Palestine, but he was not physically present in the same way he had been previous to his resurrection. Now, it appeared that a person had to be in some kind of relationship with Jesus to perceive his presence.

But even though Jesus had risen from the dead, his mission on earth was not yet complete. He had to let his followers know that he still lived among them; he also had to let them know that his mission on earth was now theirs, now ours, to complete. Each of the Gospels ends with Jesus commissioning his followers, usually his Apostles, to spread his message.

It should not surprise us that the commission of the disciples in John's Gospel, from which we read today, is a bit different from the synoptics. Jesus greeted the disciples with Peace. After he showed them his wounds, they rejoiced that Jesus lived; he wished them Shalom once again, and said: Just as the Father sent me, I send you. Then he breathed on them, he breathed into them the new life of the spirit just as God had breathed new life into Adam and Eve.

What does it mean to receive the Holy Spirit? It means to be united in heart and mind with the Resurrected Christ. Because Jesus lives now freed from the constraints of time and space, it is the Spirit that makes Jesus present to us, today. So, it was like Jesus was saying, from now on, I will be present to you as truly as I was when I was walking with you in Palestine, but I will be present, not physically, but in a new way. So that you may carry on my mission, I will gift you

with Wisdom and Knowledge, with courage and the ability to keep going when you are tired and discouraged. I will gift you with whatever you need to continue the work I began. And after this, he gave them their commission. He said, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. This, then, is their commission: to forgive sins. In a way it seems anticlimactic. But wait! What was John really saying? First of all, different from the other Gospels, Jesus was not addressing The Eleven; he was addressing the disciples, which in John, means the Church and not just those gathered in the room. (Remember, by the time this Gospel was written, there was a church.) He gives the church the command to forgive sins – or to retain them. But at this time, the ordinary way sins were forgiven was through Baptism. Adults were baptized. So, the disciples, the church, are being commissioned to bring people to Baptism where they would receive the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins. Of course as time goes on, forgiveness must also be extended to sins committed after Baptism. We, the church, offer inclusion and forgiveness as a community of baptized believers.

So, here we are, twenty centuries later, as a local community, gathered in this room, as well as all believers throughout the world, receiving the commission to live in such a way that it will bring others to Baptism and to assure all that within our group all are accepted and forgiven who seek forgiveness. We don't do this in a formal way, though. We, as representatives of the community do this in our ordinary, everyday life, in our interactions with all those with whom we are in relationship. Most confessions are heard around the kitchen table, over a cup of coffee, or perhaps on a walk with a friend. Our commission is to forgive, and reciprocally, to accept forgiveness from the community, or any member of the community. Will we accept this awesome responsibility? Will we integrate ourselves more thoroughly into the life of the church

of disciples so that we can share in this granting and receiving of forgiveness? So that we may continue the mission of Jesus, the mission for which he gave his life?

The suggestion to integrate ourselves more fully into the church may sound a bit frightening. At least it does to me. But if we accept Jesus' view of the Beloved Community, a community intent on furthering his work to serve and to suffer, if necessary, in order to remain faithful to the commandment of love, then, it can sound and actually be both challenging and exciting. Incorporated into this Easter community, we seek the wounded, the neglected, the lonely, and say by words and by actions, come, receive acceptance and forgiveness. The authority to retain sins is not as easy to understand. Why would the community retain sins? I tried, but couldn't imagine any such circumstance because anyone seeking forgiveness no matter how superficially is already on the way to faith.

And what are we to say about Thomas? I so identify with his initial demand for proof that he could really be my patron saint. He certainly had some faith in the message of Jesus because he was obviously well known to the group from which he had been absent the previous week. When he returned to their company, they greeted him enthusiastically and joyfully recounted their encounter with the Risen Jesus, the Christ. He, however, did not accept their testimony and demanded even more proof than just seeing the wounds of the Risen Lord. He wanted to physically touch them. And when Jesus appeared, and invited Thomas to touch him, Thomas was overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus and uttered the climatic, My Lord and my God, succinctly restating what had been written in that beautiful prologue to the Gospel, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, who became flesh.

Then the Risen Christ although speaking to Thomas, really addresses us. Blessed are those who believe without seeing. We do see, of course, just not physically. No matter how many physical or sensual or purely intellectual reasons there may be for believing in Jesus, there will never be enough to satisfy us. One answer leads to another question. But, on the other hand, we are not called upon to be naïve, simply believing everything that is said about Jesus. That would cast us into utter confusion. If we follow the lead of John's Gospel, we are asked to place ourselves before Jesus, and see if we are interiorly convinced of his message. If his message proves to be life-giving, then we can embrace him. If our spirits and lives seem to expand and take on deeper meaning when we follow him, then we can have faith in him. We will be brought to faith – or deeper faith – in the same way we are brought to love – or to deeper love: by committing ourselves by giving ourselves over to this relationship, with good reasons, but in the end knowing that reasons are now enough. Love transcends the rational, and love gives birth to faith.

Father Fred often admonishes us to distinguish between the essentials of our faith and the accidentals. What Thomas – and we – needs to recognize is that physical proofs of faith and love, though welcome, are not essential to belief. Neither are they essential to our love of other persons or to our love of Christ. Interior conviction of the goodness and love of the other, of Jesus, is essential. If we live this out, perhaps we, too, by the time our lives end will be able to join Thomas in saying, My Lord and My God. Indeed He is risen. Alleluia!

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