

Part 1: The Mission of Forgiveness

John 20:19-22

Missio Dei: Messages from the Gospels and Acts on God's Work in the World

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, October 2, 2005

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Now let us listen to the holy word of God, the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, that describes an event that happened right after Jesus was raised from the dead.

"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.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced that they saw the Lord, and Jesus said to them, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained'."

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray: Let us now be in your holy presence, majestic God, that we might see Jesus and follow him, that the power of your spirit might help us to be a people of forgiveness. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lewis Smedes, in his book, *The Art of Forgiving*, begins by saying there is a joke that God has played on us (some of us think it is a cruel one): God gives us the power to remember the past, but no power to undo it. Even God cannot undo the past. So we have the ability to remember with an inability to forget. The only good remedy for remembering the cruel past is forgiveness. People choose to surrender their hope for tomorrow because of their holding on to yesterday's pain. Unforgiveness haunts the world.

Jesus shows us a life pattern of how to be in mission for forgiveness. Jesus' mission in the world is to bring forgiveness to the world. It is the mission of God, the *missio dei*, to bring forgiveness into a world that does not have it without the presence of a loving and forgiving God. We have an opportunity to practice that forgiveness in safe places, like the church and at home, so that we might have the courage to go out into much riskier places in the world and resolve conflicts between nations and peoples. Forgiveness is the only remedy for people who have remembered their pain.

In John, Chapter 20, Jesus is giving a solemn commissioning; it is a high worship moment when he would meet with the disciples and send them out into the world in the same way that the Father had sent him into the world – on a mission of forgiveness. The Great Commission in John is simply these words: "As the Father hath sent me," Jesus says, "I send you. So receive the Holy Spirit." The heart of this mission is to forgive sin, to live in forgiveness, and to turn to your neighbor and forgive their sin.

Now, in a pattern of New Testament interpretation, it is important that we understand that we can grasp the text of what is being said by Jesus by looking at the event that is around the words. One might say, if you have a red print Bible, that the red print is interpreted by the black print. And so we look, at this moment in Jesus' experience with the disciples, to help us understand the mission of forgiveness.

In this commissioning of the disciples, Jesus acts in a specific way. We catch Jesus at the moment where he is coming in resurrection power. He is alive because of forgiveness. One of his last acts on the cross is to forgive those who have crucified him. Jesus is resurrected forgiveness. That's all he is in his pure state. He cannot do anything but forgive. Jesus is alive in that forgiveness. He has said by the resurrection, and God has said through him in the resurrection, that the cycle of vindictiveness and retribution is absolutely over.

We are in the age of forgiveness. It is time that we move on in a mission of forgiveness. The sustained presence of Jesus among the disciples is a presence of forgiveness; there is no condemnation for those who are there in the room with Christ Jesus. Forgiveness is the climactic act, and Jesus is now the living forgiveness among disciples who desperately need to be forgiven. Jesus' purpose in the world is that those disciples would go and build an entire world kingdom of forgiveness – forgiveness that permeates every human relationship and undertaking.

But what is the reality of what happens here? The disciples are locked in a room by themselves. Why are they locked up? Because they are living in a world that does not forgive. They are being hunted and searched for. They are fearful for their lives because, as Jesus was crucified, they, too, could be crucified by unforgiving people. Unforgiveness tends to lock us up in places where we choose not to leave. We get locked up from the inside out.

Desmond Tutu tells the story, in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, about a group of Viet Nam vets who were standing in front of the Viet Nam Memorial, and one vet turns to another and says, "Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner in war?" And his vet friend replies, "I will never forgive them." The first man answers, "Then it seems that they still have you in prison." Unforgiveness is a locked room. It's a prison. It's a place of fear and darkness, and we often choose to live there for our entire lives, thinking that we are doing damage to the other party, when in fact what has happened is that we are crucifying ourselves. We have locked ourselves up and thrown away the key.

The world tends to feed on the hope that we will all live in unforgiven rooms. Jesus brings the real hope that we will unlock those doors and get out of those dark places and practice forgiveness. The key to unlocking the door lies in accepting the forgiveness of Jesus into our lives and practicing that forgiveness as a mission. Do you allow yourself... do you feed yourself... to be locked up in anger, hate and unforgiveness, thinking you are doing damage to another human being when, in fact, you have destroyed yourself?

We have whole nations that do this – whole groups of people and families thinking that they can somehow take retribution on another human being by hating them; when, in fact, what they are really accomplishing is self-destruction.

Now it is true that while we are self-destroying, we are probably also taking a few more people down with us. It is important that we see, in forgiveness, that there is a principle of joining others in their flawed humanity. There is no one who is perfect. Somehow, we think if we can stand in judgment of the other person, that we are the pure version, and they are the one who has perpetrated the hurt and the pain; we never do that.

Desmond Tutu, in his book, also points out that at a crucial point when he thought he had really worked through all the issues of racism, he tells the story of flying from South Africa to Nigeria in a small plane. As they took off for Nigeria, he noticed that the pilots were both black men. Things were going wonderfully and smoothly until they hit some really rough air, and the plane suddenly lost several thousand feet. He shuddered to think, at that moment, "I am really bothered that there is no white man in the cockpit. Can these black men really navigate us out of these horrible places?" He was shocked at himself, for he had accepted the prison of the culture's stereotypes – even he, as a black man, had been caught in the state of unforgiveness and racism. So he calls out to people to participate in forgiveness because, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Jesus breaks into our locked prisons of unforgiveness. We cannot break out on our own. Only Jesus can break in on us. This is the good news about the Gospel. Even when you are locked up in your anger, frustration and hate, Jesus can break in and relieve you, because Jesus is forgiving presence, purified. Jesus comes to us when we cannot go to him. Jesus comes to us when we refuse to go to him. Jesus comes to us when we are afraid to go to him. And the disciples are somewhat afraid, now, of Jesus. Remember what the disciples did before Jesus died? Judas betrayed him; Peter denied him; and all of them deserted him.

Well, what if Jesus isn't going to forgive them? It is very important that we understand that the essence of God... the purity of Jesus... is forgiveness even for those who have hurt Jesus himself. As he is nailed to the cross, he says, "Father, forgive them; they don't have a clue of what they are doing here." Jesus comes to us when we cannot go to him, because we are so locked up in our own unforgiveness. It is important to realize that Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples locked up in that room so that they are no longer locked from the inside out. The Spirit breathes new life within them. The Spirit breathing in them begins to move them out. The image here is that if you breathe enough forgiveness of the presence of Jesus, you will have the freedom to go outside that locked room and breathe forgiveness to other people.

The apostle Paul, who was originally named Saul, was said in the book of Acts to be breathing threats on people. But once he saw Jesus, he breathed forgiveness. Do you breathe forgiveness, or do you breathe threat? Do you breathe intimidation, or do you breathe compassion? Are people drawn to you because you are a kind and gentle presence, or do people want to run away from you because you are an intimidating, threatening presence? In some of us, hate and vindictiveness have sucked the very life out of us. Jesus wants to breathe the Holy Spirit of new life into us.

If you are locked in a room today, Jesus is here to breathe into you a forgiving life. Jesus gives us the breath of God's spirit to move us out of that room and into mission. Jesus is moving us out of this room and into mission. We call ourselves a ministry of grace, and we are, because God's grace meets us in this place. But it is a call to move us out – to be a ministry of grace in the world; to take our sanctuary to be a sanctuary among other people; to bring forgiveness wherever we go. During the week, do you see people who have the eyes of someone who is in the headlights of an oncoming car, who are looking for someone to be kind to them, looking for someone to breathe forgiveness to them?

That's the mission – not only to breathe forgiveness to our neighbors whom we don't know, but also to breathe forgiveness to those who have terribly wounded us. Jesus gives the Spirit, over a period of time, to be able to overcome those deep, deep angry wounds because of persons who have done damage to us. It's not quick; it's not easy; but the Spirit of God breathes that we might forgive those who have abused us. Jesus commissions us to go out, not to stay here. Jesus commissions us that, once we have received forgiveness and the breath of the Spirit, to take that out and breathe among other people the clean air of a forgiving God. When that happens there is joy, because that experience is so unknown in this world. When someone experiences the forgiving presence of one who can pronounce forgiveness in the name of the living God, there is joy, because it is not a common practice.

The call of the National Presbyterian Church in mission is to be a community of forgiveness in Washington, D.C. – a city that is in tragic need of forgiveness. This past week we have seen, again, how unforgiving we can be to each other in the movements of government. We are called to be families of forgiveness. We are called to be Republicans and Democrats who forgive -- not Republicans to Republicans, but Republicans to Democrats, and Democrats to Republicans. Can you imagine a city where forgiveness reigns between political parties? We are called to practice forgiveness.

When Desmond Tutu went to Jerusalem the first time in 1989, he asked the Jewish people, after seeing the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, "What about forgiveness?" He was roundly condemned when he expressed dismay at how Jewish people treated Palestinians. He was accused of being anti-Semitic, and the words, "Nazi pig" were scribbled all over the outside of St. George's Anglican Cathedral. How unforgiving people are in their hate. It was interesting that, after all he went through to bring reconciliation and forgiveness in South Africa, when he went back ten years later in 1999, a whole different climate existed. There was a continuing need for forgiveness, but because he had proven himself in South Africa as one who could bring forgiveness between warring and angry people, they listened to him.

It is important that we practice our forgiveness for the long run, and take it into places that are really, really difficult. It is then, and only then, that the toughest places in the world will finally see that forgiveness is possible in the bleakest conditions. If we do not practice forgiveness, Jesus says the result is that we say the sin remains on people. Now there is a terrible thought: that sin might remain in the world because we haven't practiced forgiveness. The costs are significant; the possibilities are high. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Can you turn to the person who has hurt you in the most horrendous way, at some point in the future, and say those same words? That is a mission of forgiveness.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, may you teach us the pattern of forgiveness. May we forgive others, particularly those who have hurt us. May you send us on the mission, wherever we live, to be a presence of forgiveness in this unforgiving world. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.