

Our Job is Just to Love
Acts 5:27-32; John 20 19-31
Sermon by Shannon Cobb
Second Sunday of Easter
Woodbury UMC
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Peace be with you! What a wonderful greeting that Christ has for all of us. This week is full of excitement. Christ has risen! Not only has he risen but in today's reading he comes back to visit.

Now I love the story of Thomas – he is so relatable. But today I felt called to talk about Jesus's instructions to the disciples in verses 22-23.

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."

Now, I have, for many years, misunderstood this passage. For some time, it appeared to me that Jesus gave the disciples the ability to judge and rule on earth – forgiving sins as they see fit. "You are worthy of forgiveness so I shall forgive you... you, not so much. Sorry." It sounds like they are being set up to be made judges of us all.

But let's take a deeper dive into what is happening in this story....

Keep in mind the emotional state the disciples were in...

They just went through an extremely traumatic series of events. They watched their friend and teacher be tortured and killed. They were afraid they would be next. They had tremendous guilt for denying Jesus and running away. This is trauma in the deepest sense.

Isn't Jesus asking them to go out and forgive the very people who they are afraid of...the ones who just shouted for the death of Jesus?

We all know forgiveness is a two-way street. When we don't forgive, we eat away at our own health and wellbeing.

The word forgive comes from the Greek word 'Apheimi' which means 'to let go' or 'give up'.

I wonder what kind of healing the disciples went through as they went out into that world to heal and forgive the people who just killed Jesus?

The second point I want to make is that the disciples were given power of forgiveness *through the Holy Spirit*. What does it mean to call upon the Holy Spirit to forgive sins? I would argue that might look a little different than when I fought with my brother as a child and my mom told us to forgive each other. She normally would have to split something down the middle like a piece of cake to get us to a point of reconciliation. We needed a fair resolution.

But Jesus' forgiveness is not to achieve justice – its Grace. This is more like prevenient Grace. It is the unconditional love God has for you even before you knew there was a God.

It's important to know that this kind of grace comes before you deserve it. Repentance is not required first.

Let's compare the order of operations to earthly judgement. Our courts and prison system is a system of punishment. We want people in prison to feel bad for what they did, right? Only when they accept that they are wrong and they receive punishment, do we claim they are rehabilitated. We want evidence of repentance before we forgive.

Jesus does things out of order, doesn't he? He forgives sins first, then *some people* are moved to repent.

Do you remember the Dietrich Bonhoeffer's definition of repentance Michael gave a few weeks ago?

the idea that repentance is not thinking first about your own needs, your own problems, even your own sins; but it's about allowing oneself **to be caught up in the way of Jesus.**

We expect to punish until someone repents. But true repentance doesn't come out of punishment – it comes out of love and grace - Love that has hope but *no expectation* of a change of behavior. A love that comes without strings or conditions.

I remember one time as a teenager, a police officer showed up at the door with my sister. The car was totaled. I thought she was going to get into so much trouble.

What surprised me, was my parents' reaction. Even before they could determine if she was right or wrong... my mom's arms outstretched and she brought my sister into a full bear hug and she expressed how grateful she was that she wasn't hurt and how much she loved her.

What I witnessed was pure love and grace. And I was deeply moved watching it.

That is what God does for us and it is what Jesus is instructing the disciples to do.

It is really great that there is a "purpose of this book" section in today's reading...in case you missed it at the end, it said that the purpose of this book is "So 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."

That's very helpful – it's the CliffsNotes version.

Isn't "To repent and be caught up in the way of Jesus" what it means to have life??

I imagine that being "caught up in the way of Jesus" is a lot like being swept away in love.

In fact, just a few chapters prior to this scripture, after Jesus washes the feet of the disciples, he says:

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I want to share a personal story. We don't often get direct messages from God. But this was one of those times I did and I think the message is relevant.

My sister, Janice died of a drug overdose at the age of 26 almost 25 years ago. At the time, I was too young and too naïve to do save her. What I discovered through a prayer conference is that for 16 years I had been claiming the power that I could have saved her and somehow failed.

While I was at this prayer conference, I met this wonderful woman who sat in the pew behind me and we decided to have lunch together. I am pretty sure God planted her right there for me. She is one of those excellent listeners and over lunch I started talking about my sister. After 16 years, it seemed like an ancient story – I wasn't even sure why I was bringing her up in conversation.... I had mourned long ago. But every time I mentioned her name, my throat choked up and my eyes watered.

Later at the end of the conference the discussion was still fresh on my mind and so when they called people up for prayer, I decided to ask to be released from my grief....I figured this would be safe little request...what boiled up when they laid hands on me was completely unexpected. I went into loud sobs, I couldn't catch my breath. It was like this wound had been torn open again.

Far off there was this little Shannon voice saying, “reign it in Shannon...get control of yourself” ...but God suppressed those thoughts...this was a safe place.

After a bit of time the prayer team gave me information on getting an *Individual Prayer Ministry* appointment...this is where I could sit as long as I needed with two prayer and healing ministers.

I put it off as long as God would allow me. Who wants to go in a room and re-open old wounds for a few hours, right? But there was this tugging.

And so after a few months I went. And what the prayer and healing ministers did was walk me through a series of exercises that allowed me to invite Jesus back into the places I was hurt.

What I got to do was lament... to ask the questions that had been haunting me...Should I have stayed with her? Why did she have to suffer so much? Why couldn't I help her? Why did God allow it to happen?

And I received three very powerful responses:

1)

A loving reprimand came back to me: "She is not yours to fix. That is my job"

I talked about this in my last sermon – the danger of claiming to have control over all circumstances. Weakness is rarely welcomed in cases like this - when we see loved ones suffering. We live in a messed up world and we want so badly to fix it. And that is not a bad thing. The world can absolutely use a few kind hearts and hands! But the danger is in the belief that you can control the outcome - for better or worse.

If you believe you control everything...and it goes well...you miss seeing the assurances God has for you...the miracles of God's work in your life.

If you believe you control everything...and, on the other hand, it goes badly...you burden yourself with grief, guilt, pain and even despair.

It takes a loving reprimand from Jesus to make me stop. "She is not yours to fix. That is my job"

2) The second message came a little later...
"you need to trust me. I have her."

“you need to trust me” this simple statement felt like the loving patience of a teacher who taught a lesson many times to the same student - “We have been working on this trust thing for some time Shannon - don’t you remember? Have I ever failed you yet?”

I know you will be shocked by this, but we watch a lot of superhero movies in our family...

And In the second Captain America movie, there was this great scene where our two heroes, the Captain and Black Widow, were being prepped for an absolutely impossible battle. The guy briefing everyone gets to their job and rattles off a bunch of really difficult maneuvers - things totally impossible for regular people. He then asks with hesitation if that was ok. The Captain and the Black Widow just give each other this quick look and a slight smile and say - “we got this”

That was the slight smile I felt God was giving me... “I got this”
A loving reminder that I was talking with the almighty God - the one who made all of creation. “yeah, Shannon, thanks for your concern, but I got this.... Trust me.”

3) The last message He gave me was probably the most important.

He said that my job was just to love her. And when he told me to love, it was the deepest love - a spirit to spirit kind of love. A love that God built into us... that piece of us that was made in His image.

When I read today’s passage. I believe that this is what Jesus’s instructions to the disciples meant.

I believe that the purpose of this church – the instructions for all of us here today - is to help people get caught up in the way of Jesus...in the spirit and love of Jesus.

To go out into this world and share grace and love to those who need it. Share it before people earn it or ask for it. Leave judgement out of it. And then trust the Holy Spirit to work through them.

For every major decision this church needs to make, this should be the yard stick – Are we loving others and trusting the Holy Spirit to do the rest?

Our job is just to love.
And believe me, God's got this!
Amen