

Easter II, Year A, 2020

Why is it that the first week after Easter, the theme is reconciliation? We believe that in Jesus the Messiah we have been reconciled to God. We say this at the Easter Vigil. It's what we mean when we call Jesus the Paschal Lamb and it's why we call it the Paschal candle. Just as the story of Exodus tells of God passing over the homes of the Israelites and sparing them the night the firstborn of Egypt are struck down in order to save the Israelites from the Egyptians. As the early Christians were all Jews they used language and ideas from their tradition to understand the divine mystery we see at work in Jesus Christ and we see in Christian scripture the explanation that he is the one who saves us just as Israel was saved from Pharaoh.

The difference is that Jesus saves all of humankind not from the slavery of an oppressive ruler but from the slavery of sin by reconciling us with God. This is indeed a divine mystery. Meaning that we sense it to be true that we somehow fall short of what we were created to be in the image of God and that we have no power in ourselves to save ourselves but we find our way back to God in the reconciling power of Jesus Christ. As Athanasius explained so long ago, it requires God to bring us back to God and so the divine mystery is that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, two natures existing together. Now, a divine mystery is not like a murder mystery where we are intentionally kept in the dark and must work to figure it out. A divine mystery is when we know in our hearts something to be true about God but because we can never fully know the mind of God we have to take some of it on faith.

So, we take on faith the divine mystery that in Jesus the messiah, we have been reconciled with God. That even though humankind can't seem to get it right, we know that God will not abandon us. Because of the knowledge and experience of this gift we believe that above anyone else we have a reason to be joyful. So how can we, who have been given so much, resist passing this gift along? And, so, scripture tells us that the earliest believers in Christ understood that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

Two thousand years after the Resurrection we get all this passed on to us through the good news, the gospel stories, and there is quite a bit going on in the gospel story today. We might start by pointing out that it is a misnomer to refer to Thomas as doubting Thomas. Other disciples doubted and fled when Jesus was being persecuted as well. And we may recall that earlier, in the story of Lazarus, Thomas is the one who convinces the rest to go back to Jerusalem with Jesus even though they were probably all going to be arrested and killed with him. But what's important here are two things. First, talking about Thomas, notice how Jesus responds when Thomas wants proof. He simply gives it to him. No strings attached, no hesitation. Second, the word in English for 'retaining the sins' is really more like holding a grudge: I am holding onto the sin you have committed against me. So that when Jesus says if you retain the sins of any they are retained, he is only speaking the truth about life: if you hold onto a grudge, it remains.

Here we have Jesus telling the disciples and therefore us, that we have a responsibility to reconcile with one another and not to live holding onto grudges and he demonstrates this way of being in his interaction with Thomas. Going back further in the story, this idea of breathing the Holy Spirit on them makes this John's equivalent to the Pentecost story we have in Acts,

where, once the disciples are filled with the Spirit, they are essentially given their marching orders. And in both versions of this story, the orders are the same: be agents of reconciliation.

One thing that should be mentioned here is that reconciliation is not the same as being best buds. It can look like I go my way and you go yours as we see in Acts where James mediates between Peter and Paul and tells them exactly that. We may have irreconcilable differences but we can't live at each others' throats. But even in going separate ways, we have to see the humanity in the other person and recognize our mutual failure. In the economy of the Bible's language we don't know if Peter and Paul had a drink afterward and made up. But we hope they didn't leave that gathering feeling vindicated. Rather, that a necessary decision was made to keep the peace and make their lives more about the ministry than each one's ego.

Not only can reconciliation take on so many forms, but it can be downright impossible. We harm people without even knowing it and we receive pain and disappointment all the time. But without it we're all going to hell in a handbasket, as we say. There really is no other way. We can have a world where people hold onto grudges forever or we can do the hard work of reconciling. Take the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa for example. One of our Anglican bishops, Desmond Tutu is responsible for this wonderful ministry and if you haven't read about it, there is a pretty good movie while we are all stuck at home. How in the world can people reconcile after apartheid? If it can be done in this situation, there is hope. Thank God a good Christian has led the way in this case so we can all see that reconciliation is possible.

Where do we see places in our lives and in our nation where we need to reconcile? What is the responsibility each of us has in bringing about reconciliation? I appreciate that here at Uconn, Dr. Glenn Mitoma always mentions that we are on Pequot land when he convenes a meeting. This is a good step in reconciling with the local people who have had their ancestral land taken so we can live here. Hopefully this first step leads to more. As we work to survive this pandemic, we see the cracks in the system and the disparities between rich and poor which break down along lines of race and color. Certainly the whites of our nation have much to answer for when it comes to the treatment of other races in America and abroad. As a people, we have deep wounds that have to be accounted for in order to heal these wounds and be a truly great nation.

As Christians we see this challenge in terms of resurrection – limitless life. We see this in terms of the Kingdom of God. We see the challenge of reconciliation in terms of what it is to truly be human, created in the image of God. It is about respecting the dignity of everyone which we agree to in baptism. It's also about respecting our own dignity by being the best version of ourselves. In this we see the power of God at work in our lives and in the world. In this we experience the love of Jesus Christ. In this we find the fullest expression of life God has given for us as children. The work of reconciliation is a crucifixion. But it ends in resurrection.