

Second Sunday of Easter Year B

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Buckle up everyone, given it's the "low-Sunday" after Easter, I think I may have brought a little more weirdness to this sermon than usual.

I have a confession to make, friends. I need to confess -that, in the years leading up to my being ordained to the priesthood, I may have had a little bit too much fun talking about it with my friends. You see, given the images of clergy that I and my pals had, I think we felt a need to poke fun at the whole thing a little bit. We had in our minds that "father-knows-best" sort of priest. The sort of pastor that would be like John Lithgow in *Dirty Dancin'* starring Kevin Bacon, you know, the movie where the local pastor outlaws dancing as a great source of sin and Kevin Bacon has to save the day with *Dirty Dancin'*. In a word, my friends and I were incredibly wary of clergy who have used their authority to mandate the lives of others.

So the running gag I had going with the anathema list, that is, the list of folks I'd get to put a curse on once I got my priestly powers. I got this idea BECAUSE an anathema from the Hebrew Bible was a formal curse that could be put on someone. And this is a thing in the Hebrew Bible, you might hear about how Jacob blesses his 12 sons with different blessings or my personal favorite anathema being, and I promise you this is a thing, Noah got drunk and passed out and his son, Ham, accidentally saw his father naked, and Noah cursed Ham's bloodline for all eternity.

So bearing in mind such a rich tradition of anathemas in our faith, as I prepared for ordination I joked with my friends about people being on my anathema list. Cut me off in traffic? Anathema. Forget my birthday? Anathema. Make fun of how cool Beyonce is? Anathema.

Of course, we thought this was funny because no priest has the power to pronounce a curse. And no person has the power to deny or judge the call of God that springs up in another. At least, that's what we thought. But the Gospel

today has given me some pause, specifically when Jesus empowers his disciples and says, "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."

There's a notion with the priesthood that only a priest can declare absolution of sins. And this is a doctrine I wrestle with, as I am much more interested in empowering people who are not priests. But the Gospel line initially struck me as kind of like a power trip. Like Jesus is saying, "alright guys, YOU get to judge who can be forgiven and who has sins that are too bleak to be forgiven." So is Jesus saying that we as baptized Christians get to judge other people? That we know better because we go to church?

Of course not.

Rather, instead of tyrannical command that his apostles judge others in God's name... I think Jesus humbles and empowers his friends and us.

Have you ever been so hurt that it changes you? Have you ever been so hurt that you cannot help but think of the person or people who harmed you as awful and you carry with you a venom for the past? A person who yelled at you, a person who you feel betrayed you, perhaps even yourself. Sins that you retain that stick in your soul like bramble thorns.

Jesus offers the reminder of our power to heal. We experience sin and hurt, we are wronged as we wrong others. And as we carry that darkness from the past, forgiveness can seem impossible, in fact, it can seem unjust. Are we meant to forgive others who are unrepentant, who can't see the harm they have done?

Jesus offers today a nuance to that call of God to forgive seventy times seventy times. Jesus reminds us that we can heal and someday hold grace for those who have hurt us. Not for the offenders' sake. But for ourselves. To find peace and understanding in spite of trauma. To find resurrection. We have the capacity to share the stories of hurts with others and work towards letting go of the sin done to us which we may carry.

Now that was my reading; that forgiveness and healing are things we can work on not just for the others, but often more importantly, for ourselves.

But I sat with a friend who offered another reading. That Jesus says yes, we can forgive sins. But that we can retain those sins. Jesus doesn't mandate here that we need to forgive those sins, that we need to do anything with them. Jesus says we can retain those sins that are committed. And sometimes, I think we need to. My friend reminded me that people can be so hurt, and offenders can be so unrepentant and so unwilling to acknowledge the hurt they inflict that those who are hurt have no reason to let go of that sin done unto them. Sometimes, we are not in a place to forgive. Sometimes, we can't help but retain the sin done to us.

But that is why I think Jesus was here for a time and then left the job to us. Why he empowered others like his followers. When each of us may retain the sins done to us by others, we don't have to hold that burden alone. We have each other.

St. Christopher's is a place where I hope healing can happen, I at least believe it is. This is a place where I hope people feel they can go at their own speed and grow as they are meant to grow. A place where sin can be retained as long as it needs to without festering; where deep wounds can be given time to get better. I also hope and believe it is a place where we can share the stories of hurt and where we can begin to forgive and heal.

Easter is about resurrection, and that can happen for each of us in the hurts we carry. That's the hope of the Gospel. Jesus gave us each power to help one another and ourselves. Resurrection isn't easy work, forgiveness and healing isn't easy. But don't forget, we can do it. Amen.