

**Peace Be with You**  
Second Sunday of Easter, Year B  
Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:1, John 20:19-23  
Rev. Stephanie Bekhor  
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“You’re walking through a shopping mall during a busy holiday season. People are everywhere, going in and out of shops, pushing baby strollers and carrying armloads of bags. Suddenly, without warning, someone bangs into you. You stumble, and your bags go flying.

“The person is horrified: ‘I am so sorry. I didn't even see you there. Are you OK?’ and he helps pick you and your bags up off the ground.

“You say, ‘Don’t worry about it, Hon; I’ve done it, too.’

“Or: ‘Watch what you’re doing! I could have been seriously hurt. If any of my things are damaged, you are going to pay for them.’” (Story from *Proclaim Sermon Series*, May 1, 2011).

We usually say some version of the first even if we want to say the second.

We give the person “a look” and hold our tongue until we get home:

“Some woman almost knocked me over!”

“Some kid slammed into me!”

“Some old man wasn’t watching where he was going.”

And a message burrows in: *some fool did something to me.*

And a little kernel of resentment pops up and is added to the pile.

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Last Sunday we joined Mary at Jesus’ tomb; today we gather with his disciples in a locked house—grieving, fearful and disappointed; Jesus hasn’t yet appeared to us, as he has to Mary. We believe his death took him from us, and then he “comes and stands among [us] and says, ‘Peace be with you’” (John 20:19).

How can you say, “*Peace be with you?*” Your crucifixion has knocked us to the ground, Jesus, sending our hopes and dreams flying.

He knows this, and so he shows us the nail marks in his hands and his pierced side, and we recognize him (John 20:20). He’s returned; he’s come back to us.

He tries again, “Peace be with you” (John 20:21a).

*And also with you...*

“He breathes on us and says, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22); “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21b).

This encounter is different than our collision with the shopper who knocks us over and breathes out an apology. Can you imagine if she said, while you sat dazed on the floor, “Peace be with you?” and she breathed her coffee breath in your face and commanded: “Receive the Holy Spirit”?

You’d probably knock her feet out from under her!

But Jesus, though he promised you the kingdom of heaven and yet surrendered his life without so much as a fight, never even says, “I’m sorry.” “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Which makes me wonder, especially in light of his next command, what kind of encounter this is?

Clearly he doesn’t feel he’s wronged us by promising us something he then doesn’t deliver. Just the opposite, in fact: he comes to us, the Risen Christ, proclaiming peace and speaking of forgiveness: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23).

We get knocked into in ways big and small—the repairman who says he’ll be there at 10, the husband who says he’ll take out the trash, the child who promises to do her homework; the spouse who cheats, the drunk who drives, the mother who walks out.

And kernels of resentment pop up and are added to the pile: *someone did something to me.*

And Jesus preaches to us about forgiveness

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Forgiveness is not part of our make-up; but if we want to live in harmony with others, it needs to be part of the equation.

The psalmist exclaims, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).

Our biology doesn't steer toward unity; it steers toward survival and domination. We come together in packs and clans to strengthen us and help secure our survival.

But unity is tenuous at best when its foundation is self-survival rather than love. For kindred to live together in love, despite our knocking into each other, accidentally or purposefully, there must be forgiveness along with repentance and accountability.

Forgiveness without repentance is cheap; repentance without forgiveness is heart-rending; either, without accountability, is empty. What good is it to say you're sorry and to be forgiven without being held accountable for your actions?

Consider Little Susie and her mom:

Susie has a birthday coming up, and she really wants a bike, but she frequently gets into trouble at school and at home. Her mother asked her if she thought she deserved a new bike. She said she did.

So Susie's mother, wanting her to reflect on her behavior over the last year, asked her to write a letter to God, telling God why she deserved a bike.

The first draft of the letter read: "Dear God, I have been a very good girl this year and I would like a bike for my birthday. I want a red one. Your friend, Susie." Susie knew this wasn't true. She had not been a very good girl this year, so she tore up the letter and started over: "Dear God, This is your friend Susie. I have been a *pretty* good girl this year, and I would like a red bike for my birthday. Thank you, Susie." She knew this wasn't true either, so she tore up that letter and started again: "Dear God, I know I haven't been a good girl this year. I am very sorry. I will be a good girl if you just send me a red bike for my birthday. Thank you, Susie."

Susie knew this letter was not going to get her a bike, and she was very upset. She told her mother she wanted to go to church, and her mother thought her plan had worked because Susie looked very sad.

Susie walked down the street to the church and up to the altar. She looked around to see if anyone was there, picked up a statue of the Virgin Mary, slipped it under her jacket and ran out of the church, down the street, into her house and up to her room. She shut the door and sat down and wrote another letter to God: "I've got your mama. If you want to see her again, send the bike. Signed, You Know Who."

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I wonder: what did Susie's mom do when the church sent out an APB, and she discovered the Virgin Mary in her daughter's room?

I'd have been equally aghast and amazed.

Did Susie's mom hold her accountable, make her return the statue, apologize to the church, and accept the consequences?

Did the church forgive her for stealing? Did God?

Did Susie forgive her mom for turning her in? Did her mom forgive Susie for embarrassing the family?

Did Susie ever say she was sorry? If so, did she mean it?

Was she repentant? If not, could she rightly be forgiven?

"If you forgive the sins of any," Jesus tells the disciples and us by extension, "They are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"

Is Jesus actually giving *us* the power to release another from sin? What about egregious sins, such as betrayal and acts of violence? Are we to forgive any and every act?

Unfortunately, Jesus didn't address these questions specifically; what he did address is that, through the power of the Spirit, we have the potential to forgive or not to forgive.

Sometimes we're too quick to let go of or dismiss a sin that requires repentance—"No, no, it's fine, no problem" when it is a problem; other times we're too bitter or angry to release a sin, which is not the same as condoning, as "no consequences"; rather, a moving forward. Sometimes sins aren't ours to forgive, but God's.

The focus, though, is not who did what to us, or what we did to them, but what we do after we've knocked and been knocked over. Listen to the words of our epistle lesson:

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us...but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 1:8-10, 2:1).

Jesus is pictured by John as the defense attorney: the one who takes our case and asks God the Father to forgive us: we who knock over and hold grudges when we're knocked over.

But rather than plead our case, than proclaim our innocence or excuse our guilt by reason of mental insanity or defect, Jesus takes our sin upon himself. He says, “Try me.” And the Father, heart-broken, out of love for his children, agrees.

Jesus hasn't wronged us, hasn't promised us something he doesn't deliver; by wronging others, we have wronged him, and yet he comes to us and grants us his peace and breathes his Holy Spirit on us, so that we can go out into the world as he has and proclaim by our words and our actions his message of forgiveness, repentance, accountability, and above all else, love.

The benefits: “If we walk in [Jesus]...Jesus cleanses us from all sin” and “we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7b, 7a), a fellowship over which we can rightly rejoice: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1).

How very good and pleasant and rare and beautiful.

But our hearts will be broken and will break other hearts. We will have to repent and forgive and hold ourselves and other accountable if we want to live in unity rather than drift apart or live solely for ourselves. We'll have to lay our kernels of pain and resentment on Jesus' altar and ask him, once again, to pick them up and to breathe his Holy Spirit on us and send us out in the world to try again, again, and again.

I'll close with this: if you're currently unable to forgive a sin, one you've committed or one that someone else has committed, then offer it and your pain to God, knowing that in doing so, it's not going to magically go away, but that you're heading in the right direction. Lift it up, so the peace with which the risen Christ greeted the disciples that long-ago day may also be *ours*: *Peace be with you—and also with you.*