

A Story of Reversal and the Power of Forgiveness

On Pentecost Sunday, the sermon will typically focus on the first reading from Acts 2 and focus on what happened there that day when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and overcame their fear and preached to their Jewish brothers and sisters about the Good News of Jesus. These sermons will look at the miracle that occurred and wonder if it was a miracle of hearing or a miracle of speaking. But that question is really a side question and not the main focus on this text. While it is interesting to consider, actually takes us away from the focus of the text, though it does hint at it. The main focus on this Pentecost text is the reversal of the consequences of human endeavors.

When we remember that the Bible is God's story and how God has tried to renew the relationship between God's creation and God, we see various stories in the Bible as humanity's actions to bite into the temptation of the devil and be like God, while forgetting that we were already made in the image of God. Those decisions to be like God has driven humanity further away from God instead of closer to God. The Biblical story most closely associated with the Pentecost story is the story of the tower of Babel. If you recall, the people of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves and let the people know that they belonged to that country by building a tower that reached up to the heavens. Because they had turned their backs on God, God scattered the people and confused their languages so that they could not understand each other. After this story, we hear of God choosing Abram to make a name for Abram so that all the people would know of God's power and that they belonged to God. This Pentecost story continues that reversal by allowing people of different languages to understand the witnessing for Jesus that the disciples did. It does not matter if they could still understand each

other in the same way after this event, what matters is that people heard and understood the witnessing that the disciples did.

But this still brings us to the question of what enabled them to give this witness. The obvious answer is the power of the Holy Spirit which they received in the form of the flames over their heads and the rushing of the wind. However, it could be argued from the *Gospel* reading that they already had the Holy Spirit given to them when Jesus visited them that first Easter Sunday evening, behind closed doors. So, it is only natural to wonder what is going on here. Did the disciples need to be given the Holy Spirit twice to make it work? Were there different purposes for giving them the Holy Spirit each time? Again, while these questions are interesting, they are only peripheral to the main action here.

It traditionally has been understood that Jesus giving the disciples the power to forgive and retain sins pertains to the act of confession of one's sin. This has set up a whole mindset where a select group of people are entrusted with granting or not granting forgiveness for a person's transgressions. But as happens so often when we try to interpret the Scriptures, we make them to mean what we want them to mean and not necessarily what they are supposed to mean. This happened in this case and the result was a concentration of power among a certain group of believers. This group then used the power of the fear of not being forgiven as a way to keep people in line and doing what this group wanted them to do.

As is so often with Biblical texts, to properly understand this text, we need to interpret it in light of other texts, of the surrounding texts and the context in which we find the text. In the case of the *Gospel* reading, we see that the disciples are hiding for fear of being crucified as their leader had been. In essence, they

were cut off from any kind of community, isolating themselves from the world around them, hiding behind locked doors. That Jesus can transcend these locked doors shows us that He is not bound by humanity's desire to build barriers in order to keep things separated. By granting the small community of believers who were hiding in that room the power of forgiveness, Jesus is creating a way in which a community can be restored which has its focus on God through Jesus.

When we take these few verses from Easter Sunday in context with the dialogue from Maundy Thursday which we heard the last three weeks, then we see this restoration of community in clearer terms. If you recall, Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper about the relationship that He and the Father had and Jesus' desire to include those disciples, those believers into that relationship. Jesus then prayed to the Father to make that happen, not leaving it just as a sort of pipedream of Jesus. By coming to these disciples on Easter Sunday evening, Jesus is further demonstrating the reality of that relationship and their inclusion into it. By giving them the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive or retain sins, the turning away from God, and not merely transgressions, Jesus is giving the disciples the capability to restore relationships and to bring others into the relationship of the Father and Jesus and the relationship that they now enjoy.

The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday was enough to let the disciples know that they did have a mission from Jesus to fulfill and the confidence in which they could fulfill that mission. The Holy Spirit is still alive and active in our lives today, helping us to fulfill that same mission of telling others the Good News of Jesus. Part of that Good News is the reversal of the devil's claim that God is withholding something from humanity, that humanity must grasp it for ourselves if we want to be like God. Perhaps the disciples realized that if God can raise Jesus

from the dead, that if Jesus can walk through walls even when He has His physical body, then they can trust Jesus enough that they can accomplish what Jesus wants them to accomplish. Even if they realize that their faith, their trust in Jesus may be the size of the mustard seed, they realize that it isn't their faith, their trust that gets things done, but the One in whom they have placed their trust that accomplishes things. It was with this confidence that they could go out and do all those things that are recorded in the rest of the New Testament. It is with this same confidence that we can go out and do those things which we are called to do in the name of Jesus. It is this same Holy Spirit that is with us as we go out into the world and proclaim the Good News of Jesus, that God has meant all that God said throughout the Scriptures of wanting us to be in relationship with God for all eternity.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: https://youtu.be/p6ts4iu3J_E

Service: https://youtu.be/JXc2XDrI_E