

## FORGIVING AND RETAINING AT EASTER

John 20:19–23

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on April 23, 2017, the Second Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’*

*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’*

*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘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.’*

### I.

When I began my ministry in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1980, I was the third pastor on the staff, fresh out of seminary, always third in line when the preaching schedule was handed out.

My first sermon was not even on Sunday morning in the Sanctuary, but on Saturday night in a barn on a ranch outside of town where the church was holding a picnic. I don’t blame people for having more interest in the pork and beef bar-b-que awaiting them than in any word from the Lord I might offer, but we were scheduled to worship, and I was scheduled to preach, so preach I did, a makeshift pulpit.

Afterwards a curmudgeonly elder came up to me rubbing his neck and said: “You did a good job, young feller, ’cept my head kept bobbing up and down following your movement.” Sure enough, the whole time I had been preaching I was going up and down on my ankles, like this. The elder was giving me gruff but friendly advice.

A few weeks later I gave my first sermon on Sunday morning, and my ankles were riveted to the chancel floor.

Alliteration being the easiest form of poetry, I entitled the sermon “The Focus of Faith is Forgiveness.” It began with me telling the story of the young husband and father who lived across the street from the home in which I had grown up, who managed a plant and warehouse for a major drug company, who had given me a summer job, and with whom I had ridden to work each day. When I went back to college a phone call from my mom revealed that the man had left his wife and family and job for someone else and was living in another city. I don’t remember the content of the sermon, but its message must have been the focus of faith is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a big topic in Christian faith, wrenching and difficult as it often is.

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Earlier this week, a longtime member of the church gave me a formal program and booklet she had received from a friend. Embossed in gold print on a navy blue cover were the words:

*Liturgy of  
Remembrance,  
Contrition, and Hope*

*And*

*Dedication of  
Isaac Hawkins Hall and  
Anne Marie Becraft Hall*

*Georgetown University  
April 18, 2017*

The program came from the service this past week in which Georgetown University honored and remembered the 272 slaves the school's leaders had sold in 1838 to rescue the school from its precarious financial situation. The service is part of an effort in which institutions, colleges and universities, cities, and even nations seek to come to terms with the sins of previous generations and reach out to heirs of those directly affected.

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I perused the program standing in the main office, put it in my briefcase, went upstairs to my office, and opened email. The first subject line I saw read: "Trying to forgive God." It was from a member worn out and angry from the number of premature deaths she has recently seen: a child of a college friend, a colleague her age, children in Syria. "Trying to forgive God."

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Each of these stories captures part of a moral struggle that has existed in every creed, culture, and conscience:

- A struggle between *ourselves* and *God* over sins we commit or suffering we see
- A struggle between *good* and *evil* in the world (war and peace, genocide, slavery, colonialism, misogyny, and any number of other communal or historical sins)
- A struggle between good and evil *within ourselves*.

## II.

Earlier this month, I read a column by David Brooks and an article he cited both of which are entitled "The Persistence of Guilt."<sup>1</sup> These two articles maintain that:

- The Judeo-Christian framework of sin/repentance/forgiveness no longer dominates the way we in the West think
- At the same time, our technological progress has led us to a greater awareness of human problems than we have had in the past, a greater sense that we have the means to solve these problems, but correspondingly a greater sense of guilt that we have not solved them. For example, one of the articles says, if we see a picture of a starving child in Sudan, we know inwardly that we are not doing enough. We could always give more to feed her.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," *The New York Times* 3/31/17 and Wilfred M. McClay, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," in *The Hedgehog Review*, Volume 19, Issue 1, Spring 2017.

Both these articles maintain that one reason we are so divided in our national and international conversation is that the persistence of guilt leads us to conflicting ways of seeking absolution.

- Some of us define ourselves as victims so that we are absolved through our innocence
- Some of us so identify with victims that we are absolved through the moral zealotry we adopt
- Some of us withdraw into an individualism or apolitical quietism that says “not my problem.”

Whether we are speaking of sins committed in the most intimate of our relationships, sins committed in recent or centuries old history, or whether we are holding God responsible for the hurts we experience or witness, sin and forgiveness are at the heart of faith. The focus of faith is forgiveness.

### III.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus first appears to his disciples, he says to them:

Peace be with you.  
As the Father has sent me,  
So I send you.

He then *breathes* on them 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.

These words are the first and last words that Jesus speaks to all the disciples as a group in John. They resemble words he spoke to Peter in Matthew, when he gave Peter the “keys to the kingdom,” and to the disciples, when he established discipline within the community:

Whatever you bind on earth  
Will be bound in heaven;  
Whatever you loose on earth  
Will be loosed in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Behind these questions lie a few salient features:

- Just as God had sent Christ into the world to forgive and retain sin, Christ now sends his disciples into the world to exercise that power.
- Just as God had breathed life into the human creature at Creation,<sup>3</sup> Christ now breathes life into the disciples showing that the decision of forgiving and retaining occurs in the context of and for the purpose of the life he brings.
- Just as “breath” “life” and “spirit” are linked in Genesis, they are linked in John as well. Forgiving and retaining sins involves life and involves the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:19 and 18:18.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:7.

To summarize, when the risen Christ appears to his disciples as a body in John, Christ bestows upon them

- The power to represent him in the world
- The power to forgive and retain sin in the context of life God has given to the world and new life Christ has brought to the world and continued after his resurrection with the Holy Spirit.

#### IV.

What does this mean practically for us today?

- It does *not* mean that the church sets up a list of what is right and what is wrong and metes out praise or criticism, reward or punishment based on who follows the list and who does not.
- It does mean that in as much as the church is able to relate *to* the world, and in as much as we individual Christians are *in* the world, we are to seek the places where life from God seems present, join those places, and recognize (and perhaps accept) those places where life is missing.

What the risen Jesus offers us concerning *forgiveness* and *retention* of sin is not a list but *life*:

- Where there is *life* there is Christ.
- It is *life* to which we as Christians are drawn.
- It is *life* which we as Christians affirm.
- It is *life* to which we as Christians bear witness.
- It is *life* toward which we urge and counsel ourselves, people with whom we are close, organizations and societies in which we live and work, serve and vote.

Thus when forgiveness is an expression of life, it is to be offered. When it comes as an expression of life, it is to be accepted. When it is offered as an expression of darkness, no matter how well disguised, it is not to be accepted, but is to be retained. And never, never, is forgiveness to be offered as an expression of darkness to manipulate the one offered forgiveness.

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I want to share with you that there have been several instances in my life where I have been significantly wronged and therefore hurt. The details are not necessary to share in such a setting as this, for ultimately they do not matter. Like Paul's "thorn in the flesh," it is more important to know that Paul had a thorn than what the thorn was.

While in none of these instances have I been asked by the offenders to forgive them, I have for many years wondered if I shouldn't grant forgiveness to my absent offenders so that I can – in great American fashion – "move on."

But over the years I have come to realize that in each instance for me to forgive would be trivial and cheap, for it would not be in response to life.

What I have done instead – over many years – is accept that these things happened to me, that they were wrong, that there is nothing that I can do about them, but that they have had an impact on me and are a part of who I am.

In secular terminology, I have "appropriated" them into my life. In the language of Jesus, I have I have "retained" these sins.

Contrary to what we might expect, retaining these sins has proved to be life giving for me, at least more life giving than offering a shallow forgiveness would be. And if it ever becomes the case that forgiving any these sins or the ones who have committed them comes my way as an opportunity to respond to life, then I will forgive in an instant.

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When the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he breathed on them and gave them life. I surmise he told them that when forgiveness of sin is life, they should forgive; when retaining of sin is life, they should retain.

If I were to preach that first sermon in the Sanctuary again with the hindsight of thirty seven years, I would change the title from “The Focus of Faith is Forgiveness” to “The Focus of Faith is Life.”

The alliteration is not as good, but the truth is deeper.

Amen.