

Today is the second Sunday of Easter. This second Sunday of Easter may not have the bells and whistles of the Sunday of the Resurrection but it is equally important, especially to us almost 2,000 years later. This year we will gloss over the doubts of our friend Thomas to focus on Jesus' words after Thomas has confessed Jesus as Lord and God to the moment when Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Why? Because that is us. Jesus is talking to us because we have not seen and yet we who are here have come to believe, or are hoping to come to believe, or at the very least think there might be something worth believing in. I know we are all at different stages in our faith journey and that there are times when we doubt our faith but for here, for right now, Jesus has acknowledged that our faith is something special. We are just as important as the original witnesses to Jesus' life and ministry which is inspiring and it is one heck of a responsibility.

The letter from 1<sup>st</sup> John tells us that fellowship with the Father and the Son enables Christian fellowship. We have been called together by the Holy Spirit. We are held together through our faith. Our joy comes from the knowledge and the love of God and the confidence that the transformation of our lives will be fulfilled in the life to come.

Nevertheless joy is not the same thing as being happy. When in our gospel lesson Jesus says, "Peace be with you", he's not conferring a peace of rest and tranquility. Jesus is however conferring a steadfast heart grounded in faith and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world to continue his work; our work and joy is what we need to embrace the challenges that this work will entail. You may remember that according to the Book of Common prayer (pg855) *the mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ*. Restoration involves reconciliation, the first act of which was Jesus offering himself on our behalf. Reconciliation means reaching out to establish or reestablish difficult relationships by bridging our difference through the love of God in Christ. How do we go about the work of reconciliation? First we remove the barriers that keep us from seeing those who differ from us as human, fully human creatures of God, created by God in God's image - as are we. It means recognizing that we are all connected and we need to act like it.

Our reading from Acts gives us a glimpse into what life felt like for those early believers when the faith that they had in this crucified and risen Lord brought them together in community. They care for each other. They cared for those in need, they offered up their possessions and gave over control to the apostles. It's a rosy picture. This new world is one that actually does what was commanded by God in the first place, that the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the widows and the orphans all those beloved of God would finally be cared for. This fulfills Jesus' commandment to love God and neighbor. The word for the love in this community of faith is *koinonia*. We echo this in our baptismal covenant when we say that we will devote ourselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers which is a paraphrase of an earlier chapter in Acts.

The idea of sharing our wealth is scary. We dance around the issue when we talk about stewardship and run our annual pledge campaign. This example from Acts highlights the difference between generosity and sharing. Generosity is good but someone who is generous usually retains some kind of control over their gift. Sharing obviates the need for generosity

because it eliminates control. It levels the playing field. People who had more to give turned their wealth over to the apostles for redistribution. It's the difference between pledging and giving money for a specific purpose. Control versus submission. At the heart of Christ's victory over sin and death is his submission to God's plan. It reminds me of the old Jack Benny joke when Jack Benny, a notorious skinflint, was held up and the thief told him – "your money or your life?" The punchline of the joke was that Jack took a long, long, pause. God's demand for our obedience is like that and sometimes we can't decide if our immediate and conscious will is more important than our eternal life. But there is that promise of joy. As our psalmist tells us "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity" So according to Luke those first Christians were living together in unity.

Did it really happen this way? Perhaps. But not for long. We know from the history of the church that those who had sworn to defend the faith were corrupted by the enticements of worldly wealth and power. The letters of John give us insight into the realities of life in community.

Being together is hard work. Being a family is hard work. Working with our colleagues is hard work. Worshipping and working together is hard work. Being a village, state, and country is hard work. Sin is inevitable. All of those sins that our commandments warn us about, they insert themselves into our lives. They pervert our best intentions and they work to keep us apart, to fracture our relationships and our ability to keep God's commandments.

If we are to stay true to what Jesus has commanded we have to listen for the Holy Spirit who is here to guide us. Jesus breathes on the disciples and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is the Holy Spirit who will be comforter, Advocate, and guide, the Holy Spirit who will put words in the mouth of the disciples when they are being interrogated, who will draw people into Christ and support the communities that draw together to worship him. In this breath of new life John recalls God's at in creation. A new age is being born. This is the Pentecost according to John. We will read this story again on Pentecost but then we will focus on the version we associate with Luke. For now it is enough to hear this as the continuation of the Easter story according to John wherein Jesus death, resurrection, and ascension is one continuous arc.

Jesus also specifically mentions the forgiveness of sins, the power to forgive them and the power to retain them. This forgiveness is the work of the whole community. Jesus is commissioning those who believe in him that they may do this through the Holy Spirit. This is not just reserved to the disciples but to the gathered body in Christ. If you remember the introduction to our service on Ash Wednesday it talks about Lent as the time when those who had been outcast would begin their public penance in order to be accepted back into the community. And so our lessons today are really all about community.

This first letter of Joh reminds us that "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves."

This goes a long way to explain our experience of life in community where we kind of lurch from one experience of sin to another, punctuated by those moments where we do experience the Holy Spirit in our midst when we know that Jesus is present in the Eucharist and when we feel blessed by what we have done together. Moreover forgiveness is available to us,

forgiveness that is the heart of reconciliation, given to us that we might extend forgiveness the forgiveness we received from God to each other. John gently reminds us that although we should not sin, when we do, we have an Advocate with the Father Jesus Christ, the righteous. In him lies our hope and our faith, that faith and hope that brings us joy and is the fullness of the peace that Jesus gave to the disciples gathered in the upper room. This is the peace that comes to us who are blessed because we have not seen yet have come to believe.

Amen.