

*Luke 24:36b-48*  
*April 18, 2021*  
*“Weaponizing Forgiveness”*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

I learned early on in ordained ministry that people will communicate with you not only by what they **say** but also -- and, in some cases, more so -- by what they do **not** say (or *no longer* say). There was a member of my first church as pastor, Aldersgate UMC in Rock Hill, who when I first was appointed there, regularly praised almost everything I said and did. And then, a couple of years later, he stopped offering his praise. Being young and naive, I assumed he, nevertheless, still held me in some degree of positive regard. The truth, however, was that he had taken some kind of dislike to me as his pastor, and as a result had just gone quiet. But then, one day, he let some really demeaning comment slip at a church meeting, and I knew that his positive regard toward me had now evaporated.

And it felt **bad**.

In the case of the Gospel reading this morning, however, what the Risen Jesus does **not** say to his first disciples, when he catches up with them somewhere in Jerusalem on the first Easter night, is a decidedly **good** thing. What I mean is this: when the Crucified and Risen Jesus *returns* to his disciples, he does **not** return either **blaming** them for *deserting* him (at his arrest) or for *denying* him (Peter, Lk. 23:60), *or threatening* to take **revenge** on them. In fact, his first words to them are, “Peace be with you.” Nor does Jesus return to them with plans to *enlist* them in **paying back** those responsible for subjecting him to the horrific experience of death on a Roman cross (very slow self-asphyxiation). Jesus doing *either or both* of these things would make sense to us.

What Jesus **does** return to this first disciples talking about is -- frankly -- harder for us to comprehend, namely **forgiveness**, about forgiveness as the *foundation* for a mission to transform the life of planet earth, by telling the Easter Good News of Jesus' resurrection -- *absent* of any *threats* of *vengeance* or *violence* -- and -- on *account* of the absence of such -- proclaiming “repentance and forgiveness of sins...to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (24:47). What we have here, of course, is Luke's version of what we've come to call the “Great Commission” at the close of Matthew's Gospel, in this case a “Great Commission” focused on **forgiveness** -- the altogether **new way of life** brought into the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is Good News. Because our profound and enduring lack of capacity to practice forgiveness is maybe the principal reason we humans -- individuals, nations, races, political parties, etc. -- *are*, and *remain*, painfully, and tragically,

**dis-united** -- chronically *divided* from one another, *fearful* of each other, *resentful* toward one another, and *chronically* either *neglectful* of one another, or actually downright *vengeful*.

And we all know it, and we all suffer from it. Parents are divided from children, siblings from one another; divorced or deserted partners are left bitter forever; even church members find themselves no longer able to speak with one another: what that church member did to me at Aldersgate some 30 years ago still stings (a little).

Which is why memes about forgiveness appear with such regularity on Facebook. E.g.,

"Forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past will get better."

"Forgive and forget? I am neither Jesus nor do I have Alzheimer's."

"Forgiveness is not something we do for other people. We do it for *ourselves*, to get well and move on."

"I'm a good enough person to forgive, but not stupid enough to trust you again."

"Forgive people in your life, even those who are not sorry for their actions. Holding on to anger only hurts *you*, not them."

Now, there's *some* good counsel in these posts, and maybe some of you have even been helped by some of them. But notice how they are all centered on *ourselves*, on helping *us* emotionally, *protecting* ourselves, versus being centered on the well-being of *others* -- what *they* need. *In contrast*, **Jesus'** forgiveness has *nothing* to do with *his* well-being, but only with *ours*.

Across the Easter season, the Church takes what has been called "The Great 50 Days" each year to *reflect* on the meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and -- in the *best* case, take on some new *commitments* based on that reflection. The great and enduring problem in the life of the Church is our struggle to actually live in the world -- in terms of our guiding **ethical vision** -- of what is right, good and true -- and the **moral habits** which are congruent with that vision -- as those who believe Jesus was raised "on the third day" and, by being raised, has ushered in a new age of *redemption* in human life, God *reclaiming* our human life, and beginning now to *restore* it to its created design.

Which is the **unity**, and the **peace**, achievable *only* by way of **forgiveness**.

So, the Risen Jesus comes to his first disciples with a message of a *forgiveness* which *transcends* our own human capacity to forgive, a *forgiveness* which finally breaks our endless human cycle of "**retributive justice**" -- the natural human justice (so-called) which depends on those who are *wronged* having to get their "pound of flesh" -- e.g., by way of capital punishment, or punishing lawsuits, or other satisfactions large and small. Cf. Gal. 5:14-15.

We learn through Jesus, i.e. -- and there is nothing more important for you to hear this morning than this -- that **God does not practice retributive justice**, and

so does not need a pound of *anyone's* flesh -- *not even that of Jesus*. Which makes all of our human efforts at understanding Jesus' death on the cross in terms of it representing God taking God's necessary pound of flesh in order to be reconciled to us into **a nonsense**, and not just a nonsense, but an enduringly *tragic* nonsense.

In the story Luke tells in c. 24, there is a *big deal* made out of **the scars** on the body of the Risen Jesus. Fascinatingly, he bears the evidence of the *wounds* we inflicted on him into his resurrected form: resurrection is apparently *not* any sort of "total make-over". The scars *are* a big deal. Jesus hasn't returned to those who plotted and carried out his murder saying, "Hey fellows, don't sweat it. It's really nothing. See, I'm as *good as new*."

No, Jesus returns with **scars**. Why? Well, two reasons. The *first* is to remind us of what he was willing to suffer -- all the *fear*, and *pride*, and *greed*, and *lies*, and *violence* we could throw at him, **absorbing** it all, on his body -- in order to *demonstrate* his **unfailing love** for us. This is what love does. Love absorbs the blows. Loving, caring, giving, *will hurt*, *will be costly*, *will leave scars* which, for most of us, *will not be visible* on our **bodies** but *will* mark our **souls**.

The *second* is to **awaken** our need to **repent** -- about which we are *all* so often **asleep** -- and to be **forgiven**. I mean *I'm* a "pretty good" person, aren't *you*? This awakening is precisely what the Gospel writer, Luke, in what amounts to "Part Two" of his Gospel, The Book of Acts, has Peter do when on the Day of Pentecost he preaches to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem from "all nations" (2:36-38):

Therefore [know] that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom **you** crucified. Now when they heard this, they were **cut to the heart** and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "**Repent**, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be **forgiven**...

It's this repentance and forgiveness that gives rise that day to the Church -- a new community of people, born out of repentance and forgiveness, now able -- in effect -- to **conquer** the world, *not* with the sword but rather with this whole new way of life.

How? First, understand that **Christian forgiveness** *in no way condones*, *excuses*, or *minimizes* the wrongdoing it addresses. Christian forgiveness *in no way* implies remaining **passive** in the face of injustices. On the contrary, Christian forgiveness commits to finding ways to **make visible** to those committing the injustices **just how wrong** what they do is, even to the point of absorbing the violence on their own bodies.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of the Church carrying out our mission was the peaceful march across the Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma, Alabama on what became known as "Bloody Sunday," (March 7, 1965), when

some 600 civil rights marchers were attacked by state and local law enforcement officers, some on horseback, with clubs and tear gas, hospitalizing 17, and injuring 50 others of the marchers. The still new medium of TV made the *ugliness* of the day **visible** to scores of millions of Americans, and made the horrific attempt at *suppressing* the Civil Rights movement into a *turning point* for the movement instead.

As you've certainly noticed, neither repentance *nor* forgiveness is much **in fashion** in our world today. Blaming, pointing fingers, "calling out", denouncing, silencing contrary voices, labeling some "victims" and others "victimizers" is in fashion. No one seems to be able to speak with, or learn from, anyone else. Even to make the effort to do so is seen as unforgivably traitorous to whichever "side" one is on. Frankly, it's a hell of way to live. **Can the Church offer anything here to the terribly troubled world around us?**

Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and myself from the community of sinners.

-- Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996).

*Maybe*, if we who are the Church can remember that we are *always* in the "community of sinners", and exist *only* by way of repentance and forgiveness, and are able to be of any real *use* to God only by becoming ever more skilled and practiced in this way of life-together with ourselves and others, *maybe* we can.

**Maybe** we can.