

2nd Sunday of Easter
15 April 2007
Church of the Savior - Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preacher
The Rev. Karen Wacome, Presiding

Acts 5.12a, 17-22, 25-29
Psalm 111
Revelation 1.1-19
John 20.19-31

“If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” John 20.23

Bad Dogs in the Kingdom of Heaven

Some of you will recognize the allusion in the title, which is to a tradition of our mother church, St. George’s in Le Mars: *Bad Dog Sunday*, the Sunday after Easter. Bad Dog Sunday got its name because one of the parishioners had an adult son, a young man not entirely enthusiastic about attending church. He said he would come only if he could bring his large, obstreperous dog, assuming that would put an end to invitations. Instead, everyone said, “Sure, bring your dog. In fact, *everyone* will bring their delinquent dogs, criminal cats, and other problem pets, the animals too unreliable for church on other Sundays. Everyone is welcome. This is *church*. It’s not just for those who are clean, quiet, and well-behaved.” The Le Martians were blessedly unconcerned about the messes that might ensue from unleashing the bad dogs on their little kingdom.

A few weeks ago I attended a diocesan meeting in Des Moines. Some clergy were describing a retreat they had recently held for young people. At one point, someone had

asked the teenagers what they like about Jesus. Their answer was that what they like about Jesus is that he lets them do whatever they want. The conscientious clerics were concerned; they felt the inmates of the youth group had gotten things seriously wrong. Who knows what messes they could get themselves into if they thought God lets them do as they please! These kids were sure to run amok if not properly restrained.

These are the two incidents that came to mind as I was thinking about today's lesson, particularly Jesus' words about sins forgiven and sins retained. Probably, the connection came to mind by way of the parallel pre-resurrection text, Matthew 16.19, where Jesus says pretty much the same thing, but the words are not *forgiven* and *retained*, but *bound* and *loosened*, terms taken from a rabbinic juridical context. Thus my image of bad dogs literally, and wayward young people metaphorically, tied up, or let loose, by their handlers.

In John's narrative, it's Sunday evening. Only Mary Magdalene has seen the resurrected Jesus, though Peter and the 'unnamed disciple'—presumably John himself—have seen the tomb he has left empty. They are frightened and confused, laying low behind locked doors. Suddenly, Jesus is there with them. He says, "*Peace be with you,*" shows them the nail wounds in his hands and where the spear pierced his side, and says, "*Peace be with you,*" a second time. He then proceeds to commission them, saying, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you,*" and breathes the Holy Spirit upon them.

It's what comes next that's puzzling: "*If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" Why does Jesus start talking about

forgiving and refusing to forgive? It seems out of place, at least arbitrary...until we notice the 800-pound gorilla in the room, which is the matter of Jesus forgiving *them*. After all, these are the fair-weather friends who, after boasting about their loyalty to Jesus, their readiness to die for him, denied him, and abandoned him to humiliation and death. With the fickle crowds, the Sanhedrin, and the Roman executioners, they are complicit in his murder.

Yet before their shame and guilt in the presence of Jesus can even be mentioned, Jesus speaks his word of peace. All is forgiven, no questions asked. All is well between him and them. John says the disciples *rejoiced*, but this comes only *after* Jesus says, "*Peace be with you,*" and after he has shown them his wounds, that is, after he has proved he is no vengeful apparition come to haunt them for their crimes but Jesus himself, the man they knew, the friend they saw led off to be condemned and killed. It's bad enough to see what you think is a ghost, let alone the ghost of someone you ignominiously forsook in his time of need. We can imagine their first thoughts, that moment of terrified shame before Jesus speaks peace, before he speaks the word of forgiveness, and the sudden joy washes over them.

Jesus passes over the matter of their cowardly betrayal, showing that he forgives of them, and gets right to the question of who *they* are going to forgive. There's no chance that Jesus is granting them the authority to decide who is worthy of being forgiven and the right to withhold forgiveness from those who do not deserve it, and by implication giving them the power to keep humankind under their control. This is the Jesus who taught

them to pray: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

And it's the same Jesus who, when asked, "*So, how often do we have to forgive one another?*" answered: "*Not seven times, but seventy times seven times, that is, there's no limit; we can't reach a point beyond forgiveness.*" I don't think the resurrected Jesus can have forgotten all that. Instead, I think he means something like this: *I have forgiven you, now you must go into the world forgiving; if you don't, my work stops right there.* If the disciples—and by extension you and I—fail to forgive someone his sins, then his sins are *retained.*

Why *retained*? Why not "*not forgiven*?" Because it's not about withholding forgiveness, as though God doesn't forgive because we won't, but about the power of sin, judgment, condemnation and death still being—absurdly—active, even after Jesus has in his own death taken away the sins of the world. Sin and guilt dead, put to death with Jesus on the cross and left buried when he was resurrected, yet still flailing about and doing mischief, a zombie, the ridiculous and pathetic undead. Given a shadowy half life by our stubborn belief in it, our unwillingness to be forgiven, and to forgive. If we do not transmit the forgiveness the God who was in Jesus began that first Easter, we are letting people stay bound, unaware that they are freed, cut loose from the power of death, sin and judgment. "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*" He's telling them, "*I was sent into the world for the forgiveness of sins. I'm sending you for the same thing.*" Retain someone's sins, and for them, it's like I'm still in the grave. So get on with it. Go out there and preach and practice the forgiveness of sins.

So Jesus is not setting up an earthly franchise to dispense forgiveness to some and deny it to others. He commands us to forgive just as we are forgiven, that is, indiscriminately, without heed to costs or consequences. It just falls in their laps before they know what's happening. And Jesus insists that they hand it on.

Yet, it's a command with a sharp edge. For now that they see that, despite their failure, they are not on the outs with Jesus, and that his claim to be Israel's messiah has been emphatically vindicated by God, they must be thinking *now* it's time at last to summon those avenging legions of angels, to slay those gentile dogs, extirpate those corrupt know-it-alls in Jerusalem, to have at those who put Jesus to death, and bring on the kingdom of God. It's time to set things right. Sweet justice. It's time for heads to roll. Instead of this, all they get is Jesus' command to forgive. They want revenge, but Jesus lets them know that his forgiveness of them is of a piece with their forgiveness of others. Jesus' words bring them up short. They are forgiven, and they are commanded to forgive too. There will be no accounting. Those who need to be forgiven are enlisted in, of all things, the task of forgiving.

There's an exquisitely beautiful film made by the Korean director Ki-duk Kim called *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring*. An old Buddhist monk lives with a young boy on a hermitage floating on a lake. The boy in thoughtless play comes up with the idea of tying a stone with a piece of string to a fish, to a frog, and then to a snake. With childish cruelty he watches with delight as each tethered creature struggles to move, pulling the stone that weighs as much as it does. That night, while the boy sleeps, the

monk ties a much larger stone to the boy's leg. When he awakes, the old man sends him out to find the animals he has molested, warning him that if any of them has died, "*You'll carry a stone of guilt in your heart all your life.*" The boy goes out, now pulling his own burden, and finds that his prank has killed the snake. So he does carry his stone of guilt in his heart for years, working out the consequences of his sin, his suffering slowly righting the moral balance in an exacting economy, until, at last an old man himself, he can make expiation. In the world of this story, the accounting is infinitely fine-grained and it is inexorable. Justice must be done; nothing else repairs the moral harmony of the universe. There is forgiveness, but only for those whose purity of heart has earned it.

We have to respect this. In the face of this high moral seriousness, against this ancient human wisdom, the preaching of the all-forgiving unjustly crucified God seems foolish, if not dangerous and bad. Evolution has hard-wired us to demand justice, to forgive only those who make restitution and credibly undertake to mend their ways. We should stop each Sunday morning to think about what we're getting into if we believe. If we cast our lot with Jesus we deny the reality of that stone of guilt carried in the heart, and see only the stone rolled away from that empty grave from which forgiveness and new life spreads without limit or conditions. There's a vast distance between a serious life dedicated to keeping the accounts balanced and one given over to the appalling forgiveness Jesus demands. We should make no mistake. What we have here is no serene heavenly decree from somewhere far above the fray, "*Let's let bygones be bygones!*" but an implacable summons to get down and dirty with the work of reconciliation. It means giving up on the interior assurances of justification with which the human ego fortifies itself. It means foregoing the deep, seductive pleasure of seeing myself the innocent victim, and

acknowledging the one who did me wrong as a lot like me, not some alien monster but, like me, cherished by God. It means holding the door open to a shared future I can neither imagine nor want. *Forgive him? For what he did?!* It seems possible only if we don't take it seriously. This is the deconstructive grace that hurts like hell and feels like death.

That first Easter the disciples hoped they were safe behind locked doors, but Jesus breaks in and informs them that they must open the doors, let others in, and seek an unimaginable communion with those they fear most, with those for whom they have nothing but contempt. Such is the logic of the kingdom of heaven: we know ourselves as utterly loved, forgiven and accepted by God only as we love, forgive, and accept one another. William Countryman says this better than I can; he writes:

God said in Jesus, "*You are forgiven.*" God might have said it more simply: "*You are loved, I love you.*" This message is true, but it would have been ambiguous. It might have meant, "*I love you because you're good.*" It might have meant, "*I love the nice bits of you, but I really wish you'd clean up your act.*" It might have meant, "*I still love you and would like to go on loving you, but I won't tolerate your behavior much longer.*" Instead, God says something quite unambiguous: "*You are forgiven.*" What this means is, "*I love you anyway, no matter what. I love you not because you are particularly good nor because you are particularly repentant nor because I'm trying to bribe you or threaten you into changing. I love you because I love you.*" (The Good News of Jesus, p. 5)

The kids at the youth retreat were right. They liked Jesus for the right reason. All kinds of *other* things depend on what they do and don't do, but not *this*—not God's love for them. What was true at St. George's on the second Sunday in Eastertide is the everlasting truth of the kingdom of heaven: the doors are open to welcome one and all, even the bad dogs.

Amen