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The Gift of New Life: Reconciliation

John 21:15-19

The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! If you are thinking to yourself right now that I am repeating myself, you are right. But the very fact that the tomb is empty and Christ is risen is worth repeating because it is a reality that changes absolutely everything. We stand in the midst of the great fifty days, the in-between time from Easter to Pentecost. This is a time to celebrate and translate, to articulate the acts of God in Jesus' death and resurrection. This is a time to step to the resurrection side of the cross and allow the power of God's acts to define us, inspire us and literally change us.

Soon after it is discovered that the tomb is empty, Jesus appeared to his disciples. In this passage in the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters his beloved disciples again early in the morning at the lakeshore. There is a beautiful setting by the Sea of Galilee that is traditionally considered to be the place where Jesus appeared to the disciples as they were fishing and while they had breakfast. It is in this picturesque setting that Jesus then turns to Peter and asks if Peter loves him.

Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested. Three times, Peter who could not imagine betraying Jesus did just that. Three times, Peter turned his back on his beloved Lord.

Hear now these words between the risen Lord and his disciple Simon Peter.

Read John 21: 15-19

Jesus stands before Peter. Jesus does not condemn Peter, Jesus does not demean Peter, Jesus does not blame Peter; Jesus quietly asks if Peter does indeed love Jesus.

I am fascinated by this passage. Jesus lives anew and returns to his disciples. What shocks me is that he does not even refer to the day of his arrest. He does not look back to what has been. He does not dwell on the offense of the past, but releases that betrayal and focuses on what is and what will be. This is the radical nature of Jesus that is so counter to our understanding of relationships. Once betrayed in our world, we become obsessed with the act of betrayal, focused on the details and the prospect of retribution. Once betrayed, the relationship is broken, often irreparably. We are not ones to forgive easily, much less release. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not central in our native language. These words are foreign to us, causing us to stammer and stumble and find ourselves tongue-tied. Blaming – now that we understand. We hold onto our own failures in life and we are expert in holding onto the failures of others. We are fluent when it comes to blaming and holding a grudge. Yet, Jesus not only speaks, he lives forgiveness and reconciliation.

It seems to me that the two concepts are deeply related, but not fully interchangeable. Forgiveness can be unilateral. You can be harmed by another and over time with conscious and continuous effort, you can forgive the offender. Forgiveness is certainly rooted in the expectation of the Divine and it does not come easily and it often goes unappreciated in this culture; but forgiveness can be accomplished by a single individual. I have heard forgiveness referred to as a solo sport.

Author, preacher, teacher, Robert Fulghum once wrote that he had become estranged from his parents. He wrote, "I, their only child, did not live up to their expectations. Nor did they mine. The ritual of reunion never happened. The distance was so great that I didn't even attend their funerals." This is almost more than I can imagine. In her book, *The Cup of Our Life*, Joyce Rupp refers to Fulghum's situation. "It was too late for Robert Fulghum to mend the relationship with parents because they had died, but not too late to mend his own heart....So, too, for us. Although we may not be able to put the old pieces of a situation, event, or experience back together again, we can still mend our spirits. The healing of our spirit will come when we let go of the past, stop trying to have things be as they used to be, get on with our lives, and tend to what is before us."

Forgiveness is the path toward healing. Forgiveness can be unilateral.

Reconciliation, however, takes two parties. It cannot be accomplished unilaterally and it seems to me that it comes to us as gift rather than command. It was Jesus' gift to Peter who received it and was transformed by it. Forgiveness first. Reconciliation following. Where forgiveness is mandatory in our faith as Jesus commands us to forgive 70 x 7 meaning that forgiveness is a way of life for Christians. Reconciliation takes a maturity of faith and a receptive second party.

The love of Jesus' death on the cross reconciles the world to God. What appeared to be irreconcilable differences between humanity and God are restored by Jesus' love for us. He is the bridge between the breach of humanity and God. Human self-centeredness caused the breach and Jesus built the bridge. This reconciliation is both a personal reality between God and the individual, but it is much broader than that, it is a cosmic reality between God and the whole of creation. The gift is given. However, it takes openness, receptivity, and response of individuals, the collective Body of Christ the church and eventually all of creation for the power of reconciliation to be fully realized. We participate in the transformation. We have a choice in the ultimate reconciliation.

Peter stood before Jesus and proclaimed his love for his Lord three times. These professions negate the earlier betrayal of Peter and allow the power of the reconciliation to transform his life. He will love, and not only love, but literally live out his love for Christ even unto his own death as a martyr. He will not betray his God again. The power of the reconciliation between Christ and Peter shapes Peter as a new being. Jesus loves Peter into wholeness and Peter has allowed that love to define him completely.

Reconciliation offers the power to overcome even the most damaged relationships. Reconciliation is the hope, not only for our personal lives, but for the world. Reconciliation brings restoration. It does not erase what has happened, it does not eliminate the betrayal, it does however, provide the vehicle for new life.

After the genocide in Rwanda an Episcopal Bishop spoke to a Global Consultation in 2006 in Thailand. The Right Reverend Alexis Bilindabagabo offered these words as part of his presentation, "After the genocide Rwandese had a choice to make between staying in the dust of self destruction in which we had fallen or rise over and above the clouds of problems into the sunshine of peace and reconciliation. I had to make a choice myself and the choice was not an easy one."

Jesus forgave Peter, but then more than that, reconciled with Peter. Peter knew what he had done. I can only imagine the distress Peter felt. His hope, his blessing, his past and his future is buried in that tomb and Peter carries the burden, the shame, and the repulsion of his own acts of betrayal. He has irreparably damaged his relationship with Jesus. He was warned about doing such and did it anyway. Yet, Jesus does not even refer to it. He replaces the betrayal with the power of love. He releases blame, recrimination, and revenge through the power of his love.

That love is gift not only to Peter. That gift is given to all. That gift is given to you and to me. Absurd? Yes. That is what makes it all the more radical and all the more precious. Pierced at the hands, feet and side, left hanging on a cross to die in excruciating pain, denied by one who professed to love him most, Jesus stands before Peter and merely asks, "Do you love me?" Jesus stands before us this day and asks the same question. Answer, "Yes!" and allow the healing of divine love to change your life. Allow the grace of this holy meal to love you into wholeness.

What seemed irreconcilable is restored. What seems irreparable is repaired. Jesus reconciles Peter, the disciples, and the world to God. We, the people of the resurrection are called to a life stance of forgiveness that will at times be additionally blessed by true reconciliation.

God has taken the action and given the gift with the eternal hope that we will receive the gift and life differently because of it.

The table of grace is set for you this morning. Receive the reconciliation God offers you. Come forward convinced and convicted that you, that I, that we have fallen short of God's dream for our lives. We have turned from God. We have gone our own way. We consistently seek out benefit for self to the detriment of others and ultimately to the detriment of our own soul. Yet, even in the midst of that reality, we are the people of the resurrection and are called to embrace the gift of reconciliation and release what has been to embrace the power of the Holy Spirit to live anew. It is the very life that God offers to us. Release that which holds you to blaming or binds you to animosity. Feast at this table of grace; release the hurts and offenses of the past. Know that Jesus stands before you and offers you love, grace, forgiveness and reconciliation and know that his gifts are eternal!