

31 May 2020, Pentecost  
Sunday  
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b,  
John 20:19-23  
A Dynamic,  
Commissioning Spirit  
First Mennonite Church

The disciples  
were scared.  
And can anyone  
blame them? It  
had been a  
horrible week  
in Jerusalem.  
Jesus, in whom  
they had  
trusted, Jesus,  
whom they

loved, had been terribly, publicly crucified and tortured  
to death. The mob had screamed, “Crucify him!” His  
disciples, his closet friends, had forsaken him and fled.

And now they found themselves hunkered down behind  
locked doors. The doors were locked securely. After all,  
the same Roman soldiers who had so cruelly crucified  
Jesus could be searching for his accomplices’,

And to their astonishment Jesus, Jesus with holes in his  
hands and a gash in his side, came and stood among



# Receive the Holy Spirit.

John 20:22

them. He had returned to the very ones who deserted him. And what were his first words to them?

Were his first words, “Where were you people when I needed you?” Or, “I thought you said that you would stick with me no matter what?” Or, “How could you? You were the ones I had spent the most time with and those in whom I had the most trust! You betrayed me. Not just Judas! All of you fled.”

No, his first words were, “*Peace be with you.*” Jesus pronounces “peace” upon his disciples before any of them ask for it. His first word to them on Easter evening is at odds with the way we usually think of forgiveness. For us, if we forgive at all, it is a distinctly secondary word. First, “Let the offender ask for forgiveness, say that he is sorry, truly sorry, then forgiveness may come.” But that night behind the locked doors, Jesus says, Peace. I forgive you.

Earlier he had commanded them to forgive their enemies. Earlier he had said repeatedly that he came to forgive sinners. But until that night, when he came through their locked doors and spoke to them, I don’t think they really believed him.

And to his worst betrayers, his enemies who claimed to be his best friends, he says, “Peace.”

He forgave them. In John’s Gospel, the word, “forgive” carries the meaning of setting someone free or releasing someone from something. This makes a lot of sense to me. Often, when those who have wronged others experience forgiveness, they are released, set free from a great deal of shame, guilt or burden. They are set free.

Jesus not only gave the disciples peace and forgiveness. Jesus then said to them, “Here’s my Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who motivated me. The Spirit who empowered me to preach, who cast me into the wilderness, who enabled me to do all the good works that I performed, I now give you that same Spirit.”

Jesus breathed upon them. He gave them everything he had.

And then he commissioned them—and us. He commanded us to go forth and forgive, that is set others free or release the sins of others.

Surprising, but typical of Jesus to confront disobedient, fearful disciples by forgiving them and then giving them a job to do.

*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.’ (John20:22b-23)*

If this verse sounds similar to the binding and loosing verse in Matthew, you are right! That’s how Jesus gets done what he wants done in the world. He calls to himself ordinary, sinful, misunderstanding, fearful people (like us!) and sends them forth in his name to do the very same things that he does.

I need to say something about sin here. Many Christians tend to think of sin in terms of **moral failing**—where I grew up, sin was narrowly defined with smoking, drinking, and dancing.

Too often Christians, Mennonites included, have understood the church to be without spot or wrinkle, that is, those inside the church must be morally perfect. Well, at least we are supposed to act that way—put that, “I’m morally perfect mask” on when we come to church—even though we all know none of us are like that. None of us are without spot or wrinkle.

As a result, many Christians, Mennonites included, see the role of the church to be God’s moral watchdog, that our job is to arbitrate people’s assets and liabilities on a

heavenly balance sheet. As a result, I suspect we all have experienced church full of an abundance of judgment and a shortage of grace.

I suspect all of us have a story or two about a friend, acquaintance, family member who were hurt by judgmental attitudes or actions within the church by church people. I could share stories of people being condemned for not being good enough, people being ridiculed, abused. Many of these stories are from people who no longer want anything to do with the church because of the negative judgmental attitudes and actions from church people.

Throughout the Gospel of John, nobody seems fully to understand who Jesus really is. *“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him”*, is how John 1:10 states it.

Sin, in John's Gospel, is a misunderstanding, confusion, and the inability to see who Jesus really is as the Word Made Flesh, the Eternal Word with us. To have sin is to remain estranged and alienated from God, not being in a close relationship with God.

In other words, sin in John is not about moral failings; primarily it is an inability or refusal to recognize God's

revelation when confronted by it, in Jesus. Note please what Jesus, says, concerning the world, in John 15:22:

*“If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.”*

John also tells the story of the man born blind. After Jesus heals him there is a huge conflict between the man born blind and the Pharisees. It gets to the point where the Pharisees refuse to accept the man was even blind in the first place even though the man’s neighbours and parents said he was. The consequences of the inability to see is ongoing resistance, or blindness. This was Jesus’ assessment of the situation:

*‘I came into this world for judgement so that those **who do not see** may see, and those **who do see may become blind.**’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains. (John 9:39-41)*

Throughout the Gospel of John, misunderstanding, confusion, and the inability to see are identified with our sin. We are bound by our incomprehension and misunderstanding into wrongful patterns of actions.

But now, here in a locked room on Pentecost, which in John's gospel, is Easter evening, Jesus breathes into us the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives us confused, blind, and unfaithful ones a gift. The Teacher bestows upon us the power that will enable us to have our eyes opened so that we will fully understand. If you ever wonder if you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, then consider how it is that you, at least to some degree, know Jesus and understand him. Your understanding of God is a work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

But here's the important thing. Please note in today's scripture that Jesus doesn't leave it there. Jesus does not simply breathe upon these disciples, who happen also to be his betrayers, giving them his empowering, informing Holy Spirit. Jesus has a mission that includes both inside and outside the church.

The mission for us inside the church is **do not judge, so that you may not be judged.** (*Matthew 7:1*). What do I mean by this? I want to make a distinction between the kind of negative judgment I spoke about earlier with the word discernment. I agree with those who say that the church who refrains from discerning right from wrong, good from evil, does not take sin seriously. A church that does this is unfaithful to the way of Jesus.

Discerning right from wrong is part of our calling, and even confronting a brother or sister who has chosen a sinful path is part of our calling. **BUT here is the important point:** there are some vitally important principles of scripture that shape how this should be done. And **none of them** allow for the type of condemning judgment that is prevalent among so-called, spotless and wrinkleless, Christians.

The motive in Galatians 6 for confronting an erring brother or sister is for what reason? It is for **restoring them gently**. That's the reason to confront. In Matthew 7, the reason to confront **always requires self-examination**. We are invited to take the speck out of our sister's or brother's eye. It's doesn't say leave it in there. If there's something that is keeping others from seeing Jesus clearly, if there is something that is keeping others from walking in the paths of Jesus, we must do something about it. It's not saying we shouldn't do it. It says that doing anything requires self-examination. Yes, take the speck out of the other's eye **but only after** we've taken the log out of our own eye.

Sin, in John's gospel is serious business that requires discernment. Those of you who are baptized may remember your baptismal vows you made to the church and the church made to you: there was a promise to be



mutually accountable. That's NOT judging; that's discerning. That's caring enough for others that we want everyone to keep following the path that honours Christ.

Jesus breathed on his disciples giving them the Holy Spirit for work, not just among the inner circle of his followers. Jesus also gives them his Holy Spirit and commissions them to go out into all the world, to “any” outside the room and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, testify to them so that they too might know the truth about God and thereby be unbound from their misunderstanding.

One of the ways we can bear such witness is by the way we treat one another in the church. Earlier in John, Jesus gave his disciples instructions for how they were to treat each other:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ (John 13:34-35)*

This is the way the risen Christ does business. Whatever he wants done in the world, he chooses to do it through delegation, by commissioning ordinary, Spirit-filled people (us!) to do it for him. He gives us the work that previously only God could do, giving us the Holy Spirit so

that we might not only practically show the world who Jesus is through how we treat each other, but also set people free just like he set us free.

Here we are, gathered virtually behind our closed doors in front of our computer screens. Some of us may even be like those first disciples who gathered together—some of us are here in fear. And that's okay. It's good to be gathered in Christ, assembled as God's people. During our worship, Jesus comes and stands among us. Through the words of scripture and the music of our songs, we feel his Holy Spirit wafting over us. Our eyes are opened. We learn new things about Jesus and his way. We come to believe. We are freed from the boundaries of what we think God can do and what God is unable to do. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John and also right here among you and me.

Note that is not the end of our story. Jesus gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit in order that we may be equipped for his commission *to go forth to love and serve the Lord*. There you have the purpose of the church, the significance of the good news of Jesus Christ, in a nutshell. You, the recipients of the Holy Spirit. You, workers with God in the salvation of the world. You, the gifted and the commissioned. Empowered to be God's people. Thanks be to God!