

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 7, 2024

Practicality

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Poor Thomas, the guy merely wants what the other disciples got from Jesus, and for that he's known for millennia as "Doubting Thomas." Is it really so wrong for him to want fairness, equity, the same treatment the others got? That's what he's after, isn't it? The same as the others got.

Jesus appears offering peace and proof to all the disciples except one. Just imagine being that one! Perhaps if the text told us why he wasn't with the others, then Thomas might catch a break, right? Maybe he was being detained and interrogated by the Romans. Maybe he was out getting food and supplies for the group. Maybe he was with other believers, getting them to safety. There are valid reasons for him to miss out on this, but we don't get any of that context.

No, what we have is practicality. Thomas learns that the others have seen and touched the risen Lord, and Thomas simply wants what the others got. A very practical stance. The others got to examine Jesus, why can't he insist on the same? Well, because it's not about fairness or practicality. What Thomas is trying to exert in this scene is control.

Control often hides behind practicality. Rather than allowing people to dream big and try to make positive change in the world, so often our leaders tell us it's not practical. And so we get half measures at best...though more often than not all we get are empty platitudes and hollow words. Incrementalism...practicality...tools used to stymie change and reform. Fairness is another disguise control likes to use: "I didn't get paternity leave, why should you?" "My student loans weren't forgiven, why should theirs be?" See how that works?

These are very human inclinations. We hear the big dreams and grand visions that others offer, and rather than dreaming big with them we undercut or complain. This is part of the grave danger behind verses 22 and 23 of our gospel text today: "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, '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.’”

What a grand vision Christ is offering the early church. Forgiveness is yours to share with the world. But practically speaking...what a great means of control. Which is exactly how the church has used these verses over the years. Raising doctrines and dogmas granting this power to the select...the powerful.

This argument even arose among the reformers. In the Lutheran tradition we recognize two sacraments, but it was almost three. The one that got argued about was this power...the forgiveness of sins. Should this power be reserved for the clergy, the “office of the keys” in the language of these debates? Read some of the arguments from the time, it’s fascinating stuff. Many argued that clergy alone should have this power to ensure “good order” and so that this power is not “abused.” And we find echoes of these arguments in the Lutheran church of today.

Most of you will recognize these words from our hymnal’s rite of confession and forgiveness: “As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins...”¹ You may have noticed (or perhaps not as I rarely use this version of the rite), that I change these words to “As a baptized member of the church of Christ...” I do this because I do not see this power being given exclusively to the clergy. Rather, it is given to all who follow the Way of Christ. The grand vision of the kingdom of God is a world full of forgiveness, and the means of enacting this vision has been turned into a means of differentiation and control.

There is a reason we have this power being granted in the midst of this narrative about practical Thomas...fair Thomas...and ultimately, controlling Thomas. And that’s what he’s aiming for, isn’t it? Control. He wants to set the terms of Christ’s appearance to him. He wants a say in what Jesus does next.

What boggles my mind is that Jesus caters to him! But perhaps that shouldn’t surprise me. Jesus consistently meets his followers where they’re at. Jesus routinely acquiesces to those around him in order to plant the seeds of faith. And that seems to be what Jesus is up to here with Thomas too. Meeting him where he’s at, planting seeds of faith in him, and then challenging him to move past the need for control, be it disguised as fairness or practicality. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

¹ America, Evangelical Lutheran Church In. Evangelical Lutheran worship. 2006, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical_Lutheran_Worship.

Blessed are those who don't try to dictate how and when Jesus appears to them. Blessed are they who see Christ in those around them. Blessed are we when we walk the Way, when we pursue the Kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek and powerless as they cannot insist on control. Blessed are the oppressed for Christ grants them power too, the power to forgive, the power to reconcile, the power to resist in love.

"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."² What great power Christ's followers are granted! But that power is granted in the middle of Jesus meeting people where they're at. That power is granted in the midst of a lesson about resisting the desire to control God and God's actions. That great power is rightly used in service to the in-breaking of God's Kingdom.

Christ invites us to give up notions of control, fairness, and practicality. Then Christ invites us to meet people where they are at and love them there. And having experienced the freedom of forgiveness, we are entreated to be people of forgiveness. But what about this "retaining" language? Well, perhaps meeting people where they are requires some temporary retainment of sins. The consequences of sin are often what lead us to repentance and change, after all. But sometimes we need to sit longer in the tension of those consequences before we are ready for repentance. I know there have been times in my life when I needed my sins retained for a time while I worked towards repentance. We're not always ready for repentance and forgiveness right away. We should always be ready and waiting to forgive. But first and foremost, we meet people where they are!

This power is rife with pitfalls. We can so easily turn this great power into control of others. Practicality leads us to erecting barriers and setting up purity tests. Fairness lets us complain and grandstand. Both so often lead to control, even attempts to control God. Blessed are those who surrender control. Blessed are those who trust in God's steadfast love, mercy, and forgiveness. Blessed are the impractical who forgive prodigally!

Forget concern over doubt (it is a necessary part of faith). Let's see in Thomas the true warning...about control. For truly, control is the opposite of faith, not doubt. Anne Lamott articulates this beautifully: "I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me — that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and

² John 20:22b-23 (NRSVue)

discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”³ We are called, not to seek control, but surrender. We are called to seek forgiveness, not practicality or fairness. We are called to sit in the mess and tension while seeking love and connection. Amen.

³ Lamott, Anne. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. Penguin, 2006.