

Pentecost

The newly elected president of the Philippines brags about the number of people he's killed and the rape of the Australian volunteer he witnessed; and North Korea is beating its chest about its nukes and here at home we have Donald Trump, a man who displays remarkable ignorance about governing and foreign affairs, and who wears that ignorance as a badge of honor.

And, it is Pentecost!

It arrives just in time because we who follow Jesus have our work cut out for us in this world that seems to be slipping ever so fast into a time of fear and panic, with leaders trying to outdo one another with coarseness and nativism...

It's not a new problem.

At Babel, the same attitudes were strutting their stuff, leading to the first Empire State building going up, with pride polluting the water and the air.

Whether it's the tower of Babel or Trump tower, the problem is rooted in the very beginning of Genesis, that moment when we become separated from God, when we steal the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Once that fateful bite is taken, humanity is in deep kim chee.

That fruit was forbidden to us because we aren't made to tell the difference between good and evil, because we can't recognize our own brokenness; our own limited and uncertain vision of each other, and even more so, of God.

With the knowledge of good and evil, we wage wars, we torture and enslave and belittle people, all the while reassuring ourselves that we are doing the work of God.

Something needs to change, and Pentecost is that change.

Today, God gathers up our broken humanity, our disparate languages and customs and world-views, our fears and prejudices and hates, by taking back from us the knowledge of good and evil, and then giving it back to us in a completely new way.

We hear it when John tells the story of Pentecost, how Jesus breathes on them saying:

"Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This gift is given not just to the twelve, not just to the ordained clergy; but it is a gift given to every follower of Jesus.

Through the Holy Spirit, we are all given the power to forgive, and to experience the power that flows from forgiveness, a power that can soften even hearts made of stone.

Take Gary Ridgeway for example, a brute who murdered scores of women.

After his conviction, the families of the victims confronted him, and understandably, most everyone said they hoped he'd rot in hell and asked the judge to impose the maximum sentence.

Ridgeway returned their anger with a stoney indifference.

"Then Bob Rule stood up to speak.

He told the man who had ruthlessly murdered his daughter that he didn't hate him.

That he didn't want retribution.

He said: "I forgive you."

At that moment, Gary Ridgeway began to cry.

In the face of such grace, his hatred and anger gave way" Baker, Executing God, 97.

And then there's Darryl, who comes home one evening to find his house completely trashed.

There had been a series of burglaries in the neighborhood and those whose homes were invaded naturally felt violated, victimized and angry.

Like his neighbors, many of Darryl's valuables were stolen, others destroyed.

When the police caught the teenagers who did the damage, instead of pressing charges, Darryl talked with the boys, expressing his sorrow and forgiveness.

The boys apologized and Darryl invited them all to his home for a dinner; a meal the boys themselves prepared not only for Darryl but for the other neighbors too, which gave birth to an annual block party, with the boys serving the food to the very neighbors they once terrorized.

Darryl says: "We can do something other than buying bigger fences and stronger locks... ..hatred cannot be met with hatred.....it has to be met with love." Id.

In that locked upper room, Jesus gives us back the ability to know good and evil — but with the firm instruction that every time we find ourselves saying what is good and who is evil — that we do so only while looking through the lens of forgiveness.

The disciples are hiding out, afraid, alone, guilt ridden.

So when Jesus comes to them today, you'd think he'd confirm their guilt and fire the whole lot of them.

Instead, through the lens of forgiveness, he gives them the power of the Spirit.

You know, one of the greatest gifts of the Bible is the irony that runs through it.

That's why you can't help but to laugh when folks get too literal with the Scriptures, because they miss the raw humor that is the soul and sinew of our sacred writings.

Who doesn't crack a smile when Jesus says of Peter, the fellow with two feet made entirely of clay: "On this rock I will build my church."

Or when the two walking to Emmaus that first Easter Sunday scold Jesus for being so ignorant about the recent events in Jerusalem: not realizing the one they are scolding is the only one who really knows what's happening, and why.

In the same way, the gift of the Spirit, given with the power to forgive sins, is loaded with irony.

To these frightened, deserting, cowardly folks gathered in their fear and guilt, Jesus says, "you can forgive and you can refuse to forgive."

But can they, really?

Who among them can refuse to forgive, in light of the forgiveness that they have received from God?

And yes, there are many circumstances that make forgiveness really hard, there are those violated as young innocents for example and it may take a really long time, and you may not ever get there entirely; and yet, even then, as Archbishop Tutu reminds us:

"Forgiveness says you are given another chance to make a new beginning, because without forgiveness, there can be no future."

Perhaps this is what Jesus is getting at over and over again in the parables...

When the son who comes stumbling back into town, having blown through dad's hard won estate, only to be welcomed home with open arms....

When the vineyard owner who hires workers all day long, and pays the guys who show up 5 minutes before closing the same \$20 bucks as the guy who's worked since dawn...

But most especially, the one about the servant who owed his boss a kazillion dollars, whom the boss threatened to send to San Quentin till it was paid in full...

Of course, you can't repay a kazillion dollars, it's impossible.

So the boss simply forgives the debt.

Done.

Get on with your life.

Except as the servant leaves the miracle of his boss' forgiveness, he bumps into Harry who owes him a fifty – and demands it then and there – ignoring Harry's promise to pay, his pleas for mercy – and has Harry tossed in the clink.

He refuses to forgive, and finds himself in the pokey!

When we wade into the mess that is our world, with its competing claims of who's right and what's wrong, as we muddle our way through complicated family lives where folks, as often as not, are upset with one another over slights and arguments, perceived and real, as we venture forth into our increasingly fractured world that seems so loaded with dogma and certainty, so lacking in humility and openness to mystery, perhaps we can ask for that power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus so recklessly pours out on good and bad alike today, and ask for the grace to see one another; friend and foe; acquaintance and lover; mother and child, through the lens

of forgiveness; and in seeing one another in that way, to pray God that we might be seen in that very same way too.

+amen