

The God of Peace

I was thinking I'd repeat my Easter sermon this week, and next week, and, for that matter, for the next five weeks.

I got thinking that because if repeating a single Easter sermon five times works for the apostles, why not for us?

I will explain.

These weeks after Easter, we're going to spend a lot of time with the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts is the second book written by the author of the gospel of Luke, and it tells the story of the early church.

And in Acts are five sermons that are nearly identical.

Here's the Reader's Digest version:

1. "...this man ... *you crucified* and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But *God raised him up...*" (Acts 2:23-24)
2. "...and *you killed* the Author of life, whom *God raised* from the dead." (Acts 3:15)
3. "...by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom *you crucified*, whom *God raised* from the dead." (Acts 4:10)
4. "The *God* of our ancestors *raised up Jesus*, whom *you had killed* by hanging him on a tree." (Acts 5:30)
5. "*They put him to death* by hanging him on a tree; but *God raised him* on the third day and allowed him to appear..." (Acts 10:39-40)

Now you may hear these sermons and think: "Man, what a guilt trip!"

Or, if you have a streak of Mel Gibson in you, you may think: "Those dastardly Jews!"

But you would be wrong on both counts.

In these repetitious sermons, it's not guilt and it's not condemnation that is going on, instead, something that is centuries old is being undone.

For centuries, humanity blames God for tragedy, for violence and for sacrifice.

And that has been a very handy blaming; since, if God is violent and vengeful and angry, so can we be.

And so for centuries humanity projects its violence onto God in order that we may justify our own violence.

But in Jesus, the game is up; the true face of God is revealed, and the tables are turned.

It's not God who killed Jesus, the first five apostolic sermons repeat, it's us.

It's not God who is bloodthirsty, it's us.

And so the repeated sermons: Humanity kills Jesus -- AND GOD RAISES JESUS.

It's a sermon that needs repeating because its a message we have spent countless generations avoiding.

God is a God of peace, of love and reconciliation -- but we haven't been able to stomach that kind of God.

We prefer the kind of god who loves *us* and hates *them*, who picks sides between his children.

And so, something monumental has to happen before the gunk in our ears is cleaned out so we can hear; before the duct tape that covers our eyes is so painfully pulled away, allowing us to see.

That monumental thing is the resurrection of Jesus, because in the resurrection of Jesus, the true nature of God bursts from the tomb and shows up at the 2nd story walk-up where the frightened followers are hunkered down, just waiting for the worst.

Now, if God is the angry, vengeful, eye for an eye God that we have insisted upon, what do you expect that God to do to the chicken livered cowards who abandon, deny and betray him?

The question answers itself: they're toast.

But of course, that's not God's response to them or to us.

Instead, Jesus appears to them and says the word that describes the true God from nose to toes: "Peace be with you."

Not a drop of anger, not an ounce of vengeance.

The peace that Jesus utters is more than a greeting, it offers "a whole new existence and a whole new way to perceive God." J. Alison.

In the peace of Christ, God makes things right just as Jesus did in his public ministry, just as he did even while hanging from the cross: forgiving them, forgiving us.

And what a price is paid for this free gift!

It is a price we get to share in, as we enter into the life of the true God.

And so that they can also pay the price, Jesus breathes on them, just like God breathed on Adam and Eve at the first creation.

Jesus' breath marks the new creation; the creation no longer based on violence but on peace.

And with that breath, he invites all of us to share in the price Jesus pays: it is the price we each of us pay when we forgive.

Forgiveness, as all of you know, is free, but it is not cheap.

And yet Jesus gives them, he gives us, the power to forgive sins and to retain them.

At first blush, that seems like a great power to have; at first blush.

Yet sadly, for too many centuries, we have interpreted this power as a power to hold over people's heads.

You can be forgiven if you jump through these hoops; or if you satisfy me you really are sorry; or so long as you dot this "i" and cross that "t".

But all of that is pre-resurrection "power" thinking: it is built on violence, and control and coercion.

That's not where Jesus is coming from.

When Jesus gives us the power to forgive, it is with this in mind:

"Forgive us as we forgive those...."

"Forgive not 7 times but 70 times 7 times....."

"The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you...."

"Take the log out of your own eye before you try to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye...."

"If someone hits your right cheek, turn and offer them the left cheek...."

And don't forget just who the first recipients were of that power to forgive: like us, a motley crew that desperately *needed* to be forgiven!

The very ones who abandoned, denied and betrayed him.

And what about "retaining" sins; in other words, refusing forgiveness?

Perhaps the only sins that are retained are the sins of those who refuse to accept this utterly costly, free gift of forgiveness....

I wonder whether the retained sins are of those who refuse to believe this good news, who continue to insist on a God of violence so to justify our own violence—so that it's not so much the church retaining the sin as the one who is blind, claiming he can see, who retains them...

Letting go of grudges, giving to one another the gift of forgiveness, isn't what comes naturally, it is, as we used to say in law school, counter-intuitive.

We want a God who looks like us, judges like us, and who resolves problems like us.

Yet over and over we are reminded: "Your ways are not my ways," says the Lord. Is. 55:8.

I was listening to my radio buddies the other day, my evangelical friends from Calvary Chapel, who were explaining that the "righteousness of God" means that when at last God judges everyone, all of humanity will shake its head in agreement that God is doing exactly the right thing.

In other words, God will judge exactly how we think he should judge.

And once again, I could only smile, because for folks who claim to know the bible so well, it's hard to believe how far off the mark they are.

When Jesus tells us about the final judgment, he tells the story about the sheep and the goats: and the main feature of that story is that EVERYONE is surprised, even shocked, at the judgment handed out!

Just so, I expect that we human beings will always struggle with the fact that God's judgment is about peace and reconciliation and joy; it's WE who are so in love with retribution and violence and "just desserts."

Making the transition from violence to peace IS the Christian transition.

And making that transition is the very heart of Jesus' message today: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..."

Meaning, as Jesus imitates the Father by eating with outcasts, healing the sick, forgiving even the most heinous sins, meeting violence with a willingness to suffer its blows, all the while challenging the "we've got it all together" crowd: just so are we called to imitate Jesus in his imitation of God; and we do so by doing what Jesus does.

No wonder Thomas, on first hearing this news, can't believe his ears.

This topsy turvy way of understanding God and our role in God's plan makes sense ONLY if Jesus really is raised from the dead – and just like his pals who experienced that resurrection face to face, and therefore came to

believe, just so Thomas needs to see face to face—a need our gracious Lord satisfies—a satisfaction that leads to Thomas, the very first apostle to do so, to at long last recognize Jesus for who he is: “My Lord and my God!”

The doubter is transformed into the confessor.

And Thomas has it exactly right.

The crucified man, who rejects violence of every sort, is God.

Can we do any less?

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