

Pentecost 2019

Perhaps we owe President Donald J Trump, as well as President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines and the crown prince of Saudi Arabia a word of thanks.

After all, these three men on the world stage are giving us an example every day of one very attractive way to live life.

It's a way of life based on fear of the stranger, a view of life based on scarcity, a philosophy of life that says if **you** get something, I **lose** something.

And it's a life that is the polar opposite of the life that Jesus calls us to live, especially on this day of Pentecost!

These wildly different paths that life may take, which lead to wildly different consequences for ourselves and our communities, are nothing new.

At Babel, the same big shot attitudes that we see strutting around today are strutting their stuff then, 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 sets off on a path we were never meant to take.

That fruit was forbidden to us because we aren't equipped to know 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.

In a world of incredible complexity, especially when it comes to human relations, easy answers and half truths just don't get us where we need to go.

But easy answers and half truths are where we spend much of our time, and so with our defective 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 from us the knowledge of good and evil – and then giving it back to us in a completely new way.

We hear this new way that God gives us to deal with good and evil when St. John tells us how he experienced 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 to every follower of Jesus.

Through the Holy Spirit, the embodiment of God's reckless love, we all receive the power to forgive, and the blessed peace that flows from forgiveness, a peace that can soften even hearts made of stone.

Take Gary Ridgeway for example, the notorious Green River killer, who murdered 49 women.

After his conviction, the families of the victims confronted him, and understandably, almost everyone says they hope he'll rot in hell, while asking the judge to impose the maximum sentence.

Ridgeway returned their anger with cold indifference.

"Then Bob Rule stood up to speak.

He tells the man, who cruelly murdered his daughter, that he doesn't hate him, he doesn't want revenge.

He says: "I forgive you."

At that moment, Gary Ridgeway begins to cry.

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

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

There's been a series of burglaries in the neighborhood and those whose homes are invaded naturally feel violated, victimized and angry.

Like his neighbors, many of Darryl's valuables are gone, others destroyed.

When the police catch the offending teenagers, instead of pressing charges, Darryl talks with them, expressing his disappointment and forgiveness.

The boys apologize and Darryl invites them all to his home for a dinner; a meal the boys themselves prepare not only for Darryl but for the other neighbors too, which leads 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 eyes of forgiveness.

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

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

Instead, with the eyes of forgiveness, he gives them the power of the Spirit.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: if you miss the irony that runs through the Bible, you've missed the best part!

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

Who doesn't smile when Jesus says to 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 who scold the stranger (who turns out to be 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.

It's the same way with the gift of the Spirit, given with the power to forgive sins: it's 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."

You can see his ironic smile, can't you?

Can they — really — ever refuse forgiveness?

Who among them — these deserters and cowards and God deniers — can possibly refuse to forgive anyone anything, when you consider the forgiveness that they have each received from God?

One wonders about the Parkland, Florida parents who are so eager to see the school cop be tossed into prison because he was afraid to confront the shooter — is it that hard to accept that he was just afraid?

Truly, 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, as Archbishop Tutu reminds us:

“Forgiveness gives you another chance to make a new beginning, because without forgiveness, there is 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 from dawn till dusk, yet pays the guys who show up 5 minutes before closing the same \$20 bucks as the guy who’s worked since dawn...

And most especially, the story about the fellow who owed his boss a kazillion dollars, whom the boss threatens to send to San Quentin till it is paid in full...

Of course, you can’t repay a kazillion dollars!

So the boss simply forgives the debt.

Except as this now debt free fellow walks away from the miracle of his boss’ forgiveness, he bumps into Harry who owes him a fifty – and demands it here and now – ignoring Harry’s promise to pay, his plea for mercy – and has Harry tossed in the clink.

The forgiven man refuses to forgive, and when word reaches the boss, why, the boss ensures the ingrate gets hauled off to jail himself, until he repays his kazillion bucks!!

Or just maybe, until he realizes that he too needs to forgive.

We are living in times where there is a great temptation to follow the siren song of power and greed and nationalism and fear.

Pentecost calls us to a different place.

That true power and glory and peace is always and everywhere found in forgiveness, in bread broken, in wine consumed.

The wind blows, we don't know where it comes from or where it's going.

So it is with you, who are born of the Spirit - as we together move forward to remake the face of the earth, to reshape every human heart.

This is our faith.

This is our sacred calling!

Shall we begin?

+amen