

So I Send You
I Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’”

In Matthew, you get the feeling it was afternoon when Jesus appeared to the disciples and sent them to baptize and teach all nations. Mark falls silent after the morning when the women fled from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement. Luke tells of a stranger in the afternoon coming near to two disciples as they are walking to Emmaus, though by the end of the walk it is almost evening and the day nearly spent. But in John it is evening on that day, the first day of the week, when Jesus appears. It is dark. The disciples are huddled fearfully together in the upper room with the door closed and bolted—a metaphor for the church in John’s time and in ours. Perhaps those on the inside are afraid that the gospel is too good to be true; or afraid that those on the outside will be hostile to the news of death’s defeat, death being the sum and substance of the world’s power; or afraid of the shadow Christ’s death cast over the rest of their own numbered days. Whatever the reason, fear has a way of shutting you down, of closing you off, of keeping you isolated. Fear, in fact, is one of death’s relentless strategies—not death’s final move that signals the literal end of life, but the little endings, the daily deaths that keep you awake at night and anxious about the future. That was certainly true for the disciples on this night.

With the door closed and bolted, with the disciples lives curved in on themselves for fear of what might happen next, Jesus comes and stands among them. That is to say, no matter our defenses against him, our living Lord enters in, surprising us as only a living person can. His presence surely abolishes the disciples’ immediate fears and replaces them with the one fear that is worth their lives: the fear of the living God come near! Here the question is awe and not anxiety.

Then of all the things their risen Lord could say, he says, “Peace be with you.” It was what he had said to those same disciples just a week before when they were anxious that he was leaving them. But a week ago he had added, “Not as the world gives, give I unto you.” The peace the world gives is a peace that addresses our fear of death with the state’s death-dealing power against our enemies; it is a peace that counters our mortality and the mortality of nations with promises of immortality; it is a peace that guarantees our security by denying our God-given vulnerability. “*Not* as the world gives, give I unto you,” he said.

To wit: one week later, on the night of his resurrection, the one and only human being to have death behind him bestows the peace he alone can give from the other side of the grave. Having assumed our mortality, having looked death in the face, having exalted human vulnerability on the cross, he shows the disciples his wounds and gives them the peace, the assurance, the confidence that death will never again have the last word over their lives or the lives of those they love.

Now it occurs to me that the brevity of John’s account might lead us to assume Jesus banished the disciples’ fear of death in a flash, an assumption countered by John’s admission a few verses later that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. They probably needed those signs as much as we do. Nevertheless, what we know of the early church does lead us to assume that his earliest followers soon began to live and die as though death had no dominion. It was how he commanded them to live before he died when he said, “Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” “When Christ calls a person,” Bonhoeffer said presciently, “he calls that one to come and die.” On Maundy Thursday the prospect of death so terrified the disciples that they all forsook him and fled. But by Sunday night, according to Czech theologian Jan Lochman, far from being terrified, “the disciples interpreted their experience as an invitation to freedom—freedom of a kind otherwise unknown in a period so fraught with oppressive powers and belief in fate...Hard on the heels of this invitation came the practical response,” Lochman continues, “the incomparable missionary venture of the infant church.” From the perspective of Christ’s resurrection, death no longer had any power over them!

But here is the thing that struck me in the story as it never has before. He sends out these utterly vulnerable men and women—more vulnerable, more open-hearted, more defenseless against the world’s hatred because they now believe death no longer calls the shots in their lives—and he sends them out to do what? I have a sermon I

finished on Thursday that you are welcome to read, a sermon that majored in being sent out to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the oppressed. You know me well enough to know that mission is my heart. Our capital campaign now includes a tithe for mission and as long as you have to put up with me I will hold our privileged feet to the fire of mission. But in John's Gospel, even though Jesus will appear again to Peter and tell him to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep, on this night he sends the disciples out to forgive sins.

To forgive sins. Jesus sends them out to bring an end to the broken relationships, an end to the walls of hostility, an end to the distance that we keep from one another and from God. You do not have to go far to do this. Our session retreat yesterday was about welcoming the stranger and hospitality. We introduced ourselves by sharing an experience of being a stranger in this place and reflecting on what or who ended our estrangement. Names like Jean Elliot and Bob Fles and Ann Carr were mentioned as well as experiences such as Habitat or breaking bread together in a home or simply being asked to do something. Then we took turns reading out loud what various church fathers and mothers had said about hospitality, about *being sent* to the estranged other! Lactantius, an early Christian author who advised Constantine wrote, "But in what does the nature of justice consist than in our affording to strangers through kindness, that which we render to our own relatives through affection." John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople: "If you have a hospitable disposition, you own the entire treasure chest of hospitality, even if you possess only a single coin. But if you are a hater of humanity and a hater of strangers, even if you are vested with every material possession, the house for you is cramped by the presence of the guest." Henri Nouwen: "When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them." Miroslav Volf: "The will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity." The Rule of St. Benedict: "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, 'I came as a guest and you received me.'" And Philo of Alexandria, my favorite: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

What is it to be sent out to forgive sins? In this world, these times, this land where divisions deepen by the minute, we are sent by the risen Christ to the stranger and the estranged as God the Father sent Christ to us. In him, God took the initiative to end the distance we have kept since our beginning in the garden; hence to forgive is to take the initiative to end the distance between ourselves and every other. In him, God assumed the life we have always chosen to live without him; hence to forgive is to assume the life, the broken parts, the misplaced dreams of every other as though they were our own. In him, God gave his Son, his only Son, his beloved to unlovable us; hence to forgive is to offer our lives to every other without counting the cost. Or as Paul said in sum, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting us with the message of reconciliation.

Not far from my mind, of course, as the elders discussed hospitality in this community of faith, was the fact that the overriding theme of "*Keeping the Faith*" has been hospitality, especially the sort of hospitality extended in the hope that those who are fighting great battles alone might find a disarming peace and an inclusive community in this place. The "paradox of hospitality," Nouwen counsels, "is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free." But Nouwen goes on to say what is very hard for institutional religion and for elders talking about church growth to hear: "Hospitality," he says, "is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place." The space the church has created, and with your pledge will continue to create, is a space where musicians and artists, the young and the mature in years, the seeking and the uncertain, the lost and the left out have been invited to enter and discover themselves as created free. In the hundreds of people who call this church home, Christ says to us, "I came as a guest and you received me."

On Easter evening, Jesus sent a handful of men and women into a hostile world armed only with news that the great battle with death fought by every stranger they would meet had come to an end in the love that death could not conquer. The Holy Spirit that accompanied them would do the rest, would gather the forgiven over the centuries on the first day of the week to give thanks, to hear the news once more, to ask after its meaning, to offer their gifts, to sing praises and to be sent out again and again to forgive, saying to themselves as they see a stranger coming up the road, "Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?" Thanks be to God.