

Easter 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday 2015 B cycle [Divine Mercy Sunday]

Acts 4:32-35 *The community of believers were of one heart & mind; no one was in need.*

Psalms 118 *Give thanks to the Lord who is good, god's mercy endures forever.*

1 John 5:1-6 *Whoever is begotten by God conquers the world*

John 20:19-3 *Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*

♪ Peace, salaam, shalom; peace, salaam, shalom;  
peace, salaam, shalom; peace, salaam, shalom ♪

The lyrics of that song celebrate Peace in English, Arabic and Hebrew. Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, which is very close to Arabic, and Hebrew. We have tee shirts with the same words on them. So, when he came into that locked room, he would have said either "Shalom" or "Salaam."

It is this gift that Jesus gives when he says "*Peace be with you.*" He says it three times in today's Gospel. It sounds so familiar doesn't it? We hear it many times in the Scripture, we say it to each other during the Mass. But do we really hear the *power* in those words? Imagine you were locked in that room, full of *fear* that they were coming after you after they had killed your leader. And then -- he is there, with you.

Maybe a better way of hearing the words would be PEACE IS WITH YOU -

What are you going to do with it?

In the middle of the mess of this world, Jesus says, **I** am with you, **peace** is with you. The mercy & love of God endures forever in me. It's not going to solve all your problems, or put you in control of your world. But in the midst of change in our lives and in the Church, Jesus still says: "*Peace is with you because I am with you.*"

Peter, all the apostles except Judas, the mother of Jesus, - and probably Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany - were gathered in that room. How did THEY respond to Jesus? First of all they rejoiced! They gave praise and thanks to God. They did what we are doing here when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist - The very word "Eucharist" literally means "to give thanks and praise." We are here first of all to *rejoice* because Christ is risen and God is with us.

The second time Jesus says "Peace be with you" he sends his disciples, then and now, on *mission* as he had been sent by his Father. He challenges and empowers them and us to forgive as he has forgiven.

He *breathes* on his disciples, and the word for breath in Greek and Hebrew is the same as the word for *spirit*. Receive the Holy Spirit, he says, "whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven." Peace is walking among you and can release you from sin and death.

The Catholic Church has seen these words as the foundation of the sacrament of Reconciliation. We can meet the merciful Jesus in person through this sacrament, and can experience reconciliation with his Body, the Church. This sacrament is one way Jesus still shares his gift of peace with us.

But the mercy of God is not limited to the sacrament we call Reconciliation, Penance and Confession. Christ is reminding his followers, then and now, that the Holy Spirit gives *us* the power to forgive ourselves, and to forgive each other. Or, as I like to say, we are given the call and the power to let *Jesus* forgive us, and to let him forgive anyone who has harmed us.

Without that grace there would be no Church, then or now, because reconciliation makes the community a place of peace, a place where Christ is present. It is that grace that made the scene in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles possible. We are all called to announce the Good News of peace by our lives.

Jesus also says, "whose sins you hold bound, they are held bound" Over the years, I have had some problems with that verse, until I did some serious study. The current translation in the lectionary is misleading. As I looked more closely at the word, I realized that the "*they*" in the verse clearly refers to the sins rather than the sinners. Then I looked up the original Greek words. The Greek word sometimes translated as "held bound" or "retain" can also mean "restrain." The verse is not about withholding forgiveness; It is about the depth of the power of divine mercy.

They are a promise that the power of evil cannot destroy the community of believers because the Holy Spirit *restrains* the power of sin.

Even after someone is forgiven, the power of sin is still present as a kind of spiritual pollution. The Spirit destroys the power of sin to harm us, the spirit holds it bound, even when we are facing the effects of war or economic crisis or a culture of violence. We are given this power to pass on to the world. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading says, *everyone* who believes has conquered the world through their faith in Jesus.

The third time Jesus says, "Peace be with you" is a week after the day of his resurrection. He says to Thomas, and to us, "You cannot keep me from offering you peace, my peace is not erased by your resistance. I will keep trying, come and bring your pain, your doubt, your disappointment, your fear and let me say to you: touch my wounds, see that I understand, receive life to the full."

Jesus uses the very doubt of Thomas as a way of setting him free. And let's face it, who of us has not experienced doubt. I think Thomas gets a bad rap sometimes, when he is called "doubting Thomas." Some traditions call him, "Thomas the scientist," referring to his persistence in wanting to experience the truth of his faith. After his experiment of putting his fingers into the hands of Christ & his hand into the wound in Christ's side, Thomas says the words which are the clearest recognition of the divinity of Christ in the whole New Testament, "My Lord and my God."

We, like Thomas, are called and empowered to believe and to receive *life* from Jesus. The consequences of this gift of faith are described in the Acts of the Apostles. We are not just called to profess our faith, we are called to live the faith we profess, so that we can be like the first disciples. As the 1<sup>st</sup> reading puts it, "*The community of believers were of one heart & one mind. & there was no one who was in need among them.*"

Today's Scriptures are full of the mercy of Christ, that's why we celebrate Divine Mercy today. On this wonderful day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter - a feast which we will continue to celebrate until Pentecost - Jesus says to us:

*"Peace be with you!*

*Don't be afraid of living - of living lives of justice, holiness, and peace*

*Don't be afraid of death,*

*whether it is the death of the body or the change that can feel like death.*

*Don't be afraid of sin - I have overcome it. I have forgiven you, and I will not let the power of sin in you or around you destroy my church."*

Let us join the disciples in responding to the peace of Christ by rejoicing in thanksgiving, by forgiving as Christ forgives and by putting our faith into practice by becoming instruments of peace, life and mercy for each other, the church and the world. In that way we will be glorifying the Lord by our life.

At the end of the Mass we often hear the words, "The Mass is ended, Go in peace." They are a translation of the Latin, *Ite missa est*. But the Latin really means, "Go, you are sent." That is why there are several new translations of the Latin in the new Missal. One of them says, "Go in peace, to glorify the Lord by your life. The one I will use today is, "Go in peace to announce the Gospel of the Lord, alleluia, alleluia."

But since this is still the Octave of Easter. Since this is really another celebration of Easter Sunday, I will sing it "*Go in peace to announce the Gospel of the Lord, alleluia, alleluia*" and invite you to answer "Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia."

When I was serving as an altar boy in Hudson in the 1950's, one of the priests - Fr. Moore - would sing that dismissal in Latin, and dare the choir to sing the alleluia's back to him. I am going to challenge you to do the same.

May our lives always announce the Good News of the mercy & peace of the God who loves us!

♪ Peace is flowing like a river, flowing out of you and me,  
flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free. ♪