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John 20.19-23

“Have You Checked Your Recycle Bin Lately?”

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“Peace be with you!” Not very likely, if you think about it. I’m sure it’s nice to be wished well when you have stashed yourself in a corner somewhere, inhaling fear-for-your-life with every breath. What had it been—forty-eight hours since Jesus’ crucifixion?

I’m not sure what would have been more surprising: seeing Jesus coming into the room even though the doors were locked and even though he was presumed dead or hearing him say “Peace be with you.” Words Jesus had once said were probably still ringing in their ears: “I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword.” They had recently learned what that meant. Jesus was divisive. He stirred up strong feelings, dangerous feelings, feelings that would get him killed. “As the Father has sent me,” he now continues, “so I send you.” Oh, thanks for that!

So begins the story of the church. The book of Acts is full of episodes of courage, which may be defined as experiencing peace when there are no outward warrants for it, as the gospel goes on healing, liberating, reconciling, redeeming, and generally causing trouble. But the story begins in this fearful, uncertain place—huddled together in the darkness of evening, mourning lost hopes, and being sent to proclaim hope. And peace.

There is a feature of this incredibly important little story that I’d like to consider with special attention. Along with the commission to continue Christ’s mission, along with the assurance of the Spirit’s presence given with Christ’s breath, we find another power or privilege given to the church which has had fateful effects as the centuries have unfolded, and which still touches our own experience in the church. I’m referring to what is classically called the “power of the keys”: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven,” says the risen Christ, “and if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Our Roman Catholic friends have erected an entire system of theology and church practice on these words centered around the “confessional.” I believe the practice is powerful, and many other Christians have adopted and benefited from similar practices without the institutional backing of a church. Admitting your sins to someone else can be a cleansing experience, and it is very true that one who hears a confession has a unique power to serve as God’s agent of reconciliation. Pronouncing forgiveness is proclaiming a truth about God’s nature and character in relation to the deepest anxieties and fears of an individual. It is a holy act—liberating and even life-giving.

But I believe there is a danger here. Holding that the church has a *right* to intervene in the relationship between persons and God or between groups of persons and God, blocking forgiveness, shutting off God’s grace on the basis of the church’s best judgment, is problematic at best. It has led to inquisitions and crusades and burnings at the stake. It has justified protestants in throwing dissenters into the sea to drown, orchestrating apartheid, and accepting the “final solution.”

The power of the keys unlocks a house of horrors.

But what might Jesus have meant, if not that? What about the church and its mission courageously to proclaim and live the good news is illuminated by the so-called “power of the keys?”

When we lived in the city of Cincinnati, we had to scramble each week to get the recycling out to the curb before the Rumke truck came by. It was at times irksome, and I often wished we could go back to the days when I could just drive my pick-up down to the recycling center whenever the mood struck me. But I noticed something while we were living in the city—our recycling didn’t tend to pile up much. We didn’t ever have

milk jugs on the floor or empty soup cans on the counter. I'm not saying that we do now, either, but I'm not denying it.

But there is another kind of recycle bin that you can easily ignore. For those of you who spend a lot of time on your computers, you have no doubt noticed the icon on your screen, indicating a "place" on your hard drive where all those deleted items are placed. There can be an enormous amount of junk that gets put there and never thought of again. How often do you check it? I believe you can delete all the items in it at once. And it probably doesn't have much impact on the performance of your computer, but it feels great.

I think our souls are like recycle bins. We collect memories there, even ones we think we have deleted. Among those memories are sins, our own along with those of others who have wronged us. There is an enormous amount of data there, I'll bet. But this where the analogy breaks down, because the recycle bins of our souls don't keep the unwanted or even in some cases poison data safely away from us—we are infected by it even if we aren't aware of it. The soul can't be "partitioned" quite as easily as a computer hard drive.

In church tradition, the "power of the keys" are given so that the church can access the kingdom of God. I suggest that that means in part that the church has the remarkable power to forgive, to click on the recycle bin icon and hit "delete." In other words, we who experience the forgiving grace of Jesus are in a special position to offer that same grace to others. We who have been accepted without regard to our acceptability are able to transcend the cycles of tit-for-tat. We whose offences have been deleted can move past the need for vengeance. Through the power of the spirit of the one who says, "Peace be with you" when we are most afraid, we are able to make peace when the only reasonable options seem to involve retaliation.

It is not that the church is charged with dispensing or withholding God's forgiveness—it is that we are by God's Spirit enabled to forgive as Christ forgave and thereby to inaugurate the kingdom of God anew. We really do have the power of the keys. What is not possible without the gospel is possible now. What is unthinkable by the standards of an unreconciled and ungracious world is not only thinkable but is in fact the only rational option for those who have been reconciled.

Our weekly assurance of God's forgiveness and sharing of the peace is not just an obligatory ritual within a worship service that we get past in order to get to what's really important: it's the nature and purpose of the church, the key that grants access to the kingdom.

There is another option, of course. "If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." We can choose to exercise our "better judgment." We can continue to make our distinctions and erect our fences and so forth. We can continue to pledge our fidelity to another kingdom: a kingdom of meritocracies and unacknowledged class divisions and mechanisms of putting people in their place. We can retain sins. We can withhold forgiveness and grace. We can just be a group of folks, gathered together to be conventionally religious, divisions and ranks and merits fully in place, rather than the church of the risen Christ.

If we do that, our recycle bins will be for each of us an inviolate and exhaustive record of all our disappointments, hurts, and resentments. They will contain reminders of all the times when we have been let down, overlooked, lied to, offended, and cheated. And we will cherish them. We will open them from time to time and allow them to stir our anger and stiffen our resolves.

But then, what happens if the risen Christ comes unexpectedly through our locked doors and says, "Peace be with you?" Will we hit "delete?"