

FORGIVENESS POWER
Sermon for Easter 2B: Jn20:19-31
LPC, 4/19/09

Middle management has been defined as having all of the responsibility and none of the power. You know what this means if you've ever been in the position of representing an organization and having to defend policies you may or may not believe in and have no power to change. Truly this combination is uniquely stressful.

On the other hand, there are situations when your association with the organization actually gives you power and authority you don't have on your own.

I first became aware of the power and authority of the organization as a lay pastor. While still new to pastoring, I was called to offer the church's comfort to a family who lost a teen-aged child in a car accident. I was very aware of not knowing what I was doing. As I drove to visit the bereaved mother, I thought how just a few months ago I had just been this person's friend and fellow parishioner. Now, because the church had conferred on me the title of Lay Pastoral Leader, I was going to her with some spiritual authority. When she opened her door to me, it was not just to me as a friend, but to me as a representative of the church.

Now I had a title. But it occurs to me that we don't need titles to be backed by the power and authority of the church. All Christians have the power and authority of the church behind them, if we would but realize it. This power and authority is conferred in baptism. Far too many of us fail to exercise this power, through false humility or through ignorance.

I would not have you, brothers and sisters of Lawrencefield Parish Church, be ignorant on this matter. You have the power and authority of the church behind you *through your baptism*. Yes, you do!

My authority, in telling you this, is today's Gospel reading from the Book of John. This story takes place immediately on the heels of last week's Easter story. Remember? Mary Magdalene saw the risen Jesus just outside the tomb where he had been buried a few days before, dead as a doornail. When we last left this story, Mary had gone to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive.

Like men in a car who won't ask for directions, the disciples ignore the woman and hole up in a locked room, terrified of the mob that had condemned their leader just a few days before.

Isn't it wonderful how Jesus doesn't let their resistance and their fear and their practical concerns stop him? Jesus appears in this locked room among the disciples, proving his identity by showing them his crucifixion wounds. After a little understandable celebration, Jesus confers on the disciples power and authority. *His* power and authority. *And* the power and authority of the nascent Christian church.

Jesus brings the disciples peace. But this is not to be all. He also brings them a commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus did not rise from the dead just so the disciples would have comfort and joy. Jesus rises from the dead to empower the disciples to continue his work. God’s work.

Okay, so far the disciples have reached middle management. They have been given the responsibility. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He immediately moves them up to CEO status. They not only are given the responsibility, they are given the power.

Symbolically, Jesus breathes on them. As prophets of old described, the breath of God conveys life, even to stupid clay and dry bones. A bit of Jesus’ power passes into the disciples as his own breath is inhaled by them. Then Jesus tells them explicitly, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Thus, the disciples receive the power of God. By extension, the church, represented by the disciples in this story, receives the power of God.

What form does that power take? Jesus makes this explicit too. He tells them, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The disciples’ power and authority is derived from forgiveness, received and given.

At first the words of forgiving and retaining sin seem to mean that the disciples, and by extension the church, are being given the power and authority to forgive and to excommunicate. But I think this pronouncement of forgiveness and retention of sin is rather one of those biblical statements about reality. The reality is that forgiven sins go away. Unforgiven sins hang around and continue to do harm.

But the main point is this: the power and authority of the church lie in forgiveness, just as Jesus’ power and authority lie in forgiveness. This is enormous power. What greater power can there be than one that erases wrongdoing and allows healing and new life? Even after dead-as-a-doornail death?

This is the power the church runs on. When the church grows weak, it is not because the church has failed to enforce the rules. The church grows weak from failing in its calling to assist God in healing the world through the power and authority of forgiveness.

Let me be clear that when I say forgiveness I don’t mean the overlooking of sin. I mean forgiving sin, helping people to freedom, healing, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute.

We the baptized can not only help with this, we are specifically tasked with this. And to do our part in bringing healing in the world, we are backed by all the power and authority of the church. We, you and I, are given the power and authority to forgive.

Do you doubt it? Forgive, *really* forgive, and just see how much power is released.