

The Sunday after Easter we always use the text we had as our gospel reading for today, often infamously called, "The Doubting Thomas Text." We use it so much it can become boring to preach upon it, and yet it is so important and relevant to our lives that it is something we need to revisit regularly. We face the same challenges to faith that Thomas had. We want real and tangible proof too.

At the same time I think this text works on a much deeper and much more challenging level for us. We are far more like the disciples in that room than we'd like to accept. In order to get at that I think a circuitous approach is actually the most powerful.

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, I gave a fairly long but ultimately very simple sermon. I talked about the way we get confused by a lot of traditional language about Jesus dying for our sins, because we really don't see a connection between our misdeeds and some guy dying thousands of years ago. Oh, we may have heard the message thousands of times, and so uncritically

accept it, but when we sit down and really think about it, it just doesn't add up. I suggested that the way the Gospel of John understands sin is probably far more effective for our way of thinking today. In John's gospel sin is not a moral category - as in a list of things that are good and a list of things that are bad - but as a relationship category. For John any act done within a faith relationship with God is not a sin, regardless of the outcome. Meanwhile any act, no matter how good, that is not done within a faith relationship with God is always a sin.

I then suggested that the crucifixion is a statement of the extreme things God is willing to do to be in relationship with us. When we accept that we are loved on that level, then our relationship with God is restored and sin is wiped away.

It makes for a tidy and intellectual understanding of sin, and one that indeed can play in our world today. We like the idea of God as being a friend who wants to be in relationship with us, rather than a stern God who stands above us judging us for our actions. But I promise you, by the time our sermon is over, you'll be longing for the more standard way of viewing

sin. Why? Because ultimately it lets our lives be comfortable. Here's what I mean.

The more traditional model of sin comes across most strongly in Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel follows a traditional Jewish understanding of sin. That is that there is a list of good things to do and a list of bad things not to do. You want to do the good things and not the bad things. God was happy with you when you were good and God might get mad at you when you do something wrong. When someone inevitably did something bad he or she needed to do something to make up for it - make a sacrifice or make the situation right.

The Jews believed sin was like dirt and the way dirt accumulates on your clothing. However, instead of dirt accumulating on your clothing the dirt accumulated in the temple. In the Old Testament you find some places where the prophets proclaim that the temple has become so filthy dirty that God couldn't stand it and left. That was not a statement about the cleaning service used to sweep the floors. It was a statement of sin.

Jesus challenged this understanding of sin, and the religious people didn't like it. A whole economy had been built around the forgiveness of sins. Think of it this way: If you don't own a washer and dryer you probably go to the Laundromat to get clean clothes. That was like the temple system. If you wanted to be clean you had to go to the temple to get your sins washed away. And the detergent you used was the blood of animals. The wash cycle was the ceremonies you went through. That's why the Old Testament often describes animal blood being splashed and poured out all over the place. If you do it all right, then you'll be clean.

Then Jesus comes along like a salesman for home washers and dryers. With Jesus you can now get cleaned up from the comfort of your own home. And you don't need to use detergent. Jesus himself would be the detergent.

Well of course, if you own a laundromat, you're not going to like a washer/dryer salesman. He's cutting into your business. And Jesus' proclamation that you didn't need the temple cut into the business of the temple. The temple leaders weren't pleased.

In any form though, we really like this understanding of sin. It lets us focus on the things we want to focus on, which is being good people. If we're good we think that God will like us and God will be more inclined to help us when tough things happen in life. Ultimately, as long as we are good we can live 'comfortably ever after.'

But now let's spin out what happens with the gospel writer John's understanding of sin. If sin is being in a broken relationship with God, then forgiveness of sins is about restoring a right relationship with God. What then does it mean that Jesus says to the disciples in our gospel reading, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

What does that really mean in your life if forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook for doing something bad? What if forgiveness really means restoring people to relationship with God?

It means the disciples aren't doing very well.

Our gospel begins on the evening of the resurrection. They are locked in a room because they are afraid. Jesus comes and greets them and proves that he is alive. He also says the statement about forgiving sins that I mentioned earlier.

Okay, so far so good. But then what are they doing the next week, again locked in a room out of fear? We often focus on Thomas for his lack of faith, but the whole room full of them are lacking faith. The week before Jesus had met them, he empowered them with the Holy Spirit and he sent them out with the mission to bring people to a restored relationship with God. What are they still doing there!?! They should be out making forgiveness real!

Here's what they're really doing. They're staying locked up out of fear. They don't want to take the risks God is sending them to take. They'd rather come together every week and have Jesus meet with them and give them comfort for their problems and reassure their faith.

Does that sound familiar to you? Doesn't that sound an awful lot like Christians who see church and faith as a weekly thing they do, where they get together with other like-minded people of faith and together they ask God for help and support?

What is the church? Is it a weekly support system? Is it a time to do something God wants you to do so that God is happy with you and makes sure you have a nice life?

For far too many Christians that is indeed the case. Interestingly it depends upon the traditional understanding of sin to make it work.

When forgiveness of sins is about making sure others have a restored relationship with God, church takes on a whole different meaning. Church is not a support system. It is not a weekly gathering of like-minded individuals.

Here are some thoughts about this from theologian Gail O'Day: Perhaps the most difficult part of the Easter story

concerns precisely what Jesus commissions the faith community to do. Just as Jesus was sent by the Father, so also he sends the community... forgiving sins does not involve forgiving moral transgressions, but it involves bearing witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus. If we combine this with Jesus' commandment to love one another a picture of the church's mission emerges: By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world; by revealing God to the world, the church makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained... The faith community's mission is to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus."

(Paraphrase from New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9, Pg. 848)

In other words, with just the traditional model of sin we can all sit back and enjoy being good people together and be content with our goodness. The understanding of sin John reminds us of endlessly drives us outward into the world. The disciples should not have been sitting in that locked room. They should have been out witnessing. We cannot be faithful and see church as a support system either, for it is not. It is God's mission to the world; one that pushes us, challenges us,



propels us, into many a dark and dangerous place. Even with broken and insecure faith like Thomas's God sends us out.

When we truly know the full extent of God's love we can never become comfortable, for it will not rest. Though immensely powerful and absolutely completely dependable, God's love doesn't stand still.

May you know that extent of God's love and may you be both bold enough and creative enough to effectively witness to that love. Amen