

April 19 2009 John 20:19-31 You Call This A Church?

Author and theologian, Will Willimon, tells this story about the first church he served in a sermon he titled (appropriate for today's scripture), "*You Call This a Church!?*"

He writes, "My first church was in rural Georgia. I was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor in my first parish. I was in graduate school at the time, commuting out to [serve] on the weekends. Most Sunday mornings at dawn, it was a tough trip out there from Atlanta. I used to say, 'This trip only takes thirty minutes but [seems to] takes us back thirty centuries.' It was a long way from Atlanta to Su-wan-ee, Georgia [those Sundays].

My first visit to [this] church, I found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, I was told, by the local Sheriff. 'The Sheriff, why?' I asked. 'Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month, folks started ripping up carpet, and dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff come out here and put that there lock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down.'

That rather typified my time at that church. I would drive out there each Sunday, just praying for a miraculous snowstorm in October [in Atlanta] which would save me from another Sunday at that so-called church. I spent a year there that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled, but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, and the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to be leaving them behind.

'You call yourself a church!' I muttered, as my tires kicked gravel up in the parking lot on my last Sunday among them. A couple of years later, while visiting [near by], I ran into a young man who told me that he was now serving that church. My heart went out to him. Such a dear young man, and only twenty-three!

'They still remember you out there,' he said.

'Yea,' I said glumly, 'I remember them too.'

'Remarkable bunch of people,' he said.

'Remarkable,?' I said.

'Their ministry to the community has been a wonder, he continued. 'That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled

families around the church. The free day-care center is going great. Not too many inter-racial congregations [are] like them in North Georgia.’

I could hardly believe what he was telling me. ‘What happened?,’ I asked [him]. ‘I don’t know. One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.’

I tell you what I think happened. I think that church got intruded upon. I think someone greater than I knocked the lock off [their] door, kicked it open and offered them peace, the Holy Spirit, mission and forgiveness. And now, they are called “church.”

Church isn’t [our] hard work, [our] earnest effort, our long-range planning or heavy duty giving. Church is a gift, a visitation [in our lives], an intrusion of the Living Christ standing among us.”

<http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=15>)

Sounds like a movie: “*Church Interrupted!*”

The church-interrupted story in today’s Gospel is John’s version of Pentecost. It’s saying we don’t have to wait until May 31<sup>st</sup> this year to celebrate the Birthday of the church—although we will. This Gospel is already giving us (this first Sunday after Easter) a picture of the church. One might ask: “What?... I don’t recognize the church in this passage? Where’s the pipe organ, or the beautiful Baby Grand piano. Where’s the choir?...the pastor?...the pulpit...the sanctuary!, for that matter!.

I know!...this Gospel is showing us the church at its worst, isn’t it?! Today’s passage is the most “miserable little conglomeration ever to take upon itself the name, ‘church.’ [ibid]

I mean, really, look at them! Gospel after Gospel we have read how Jesus has sought to prepare them for his departure. Like a good teacher/Rabbi Jesus has gone over and over his concise commandment (from 10 now down to 1) to “love one another,...[also] to be bold, to trust him, to be the branches of his vine, to feed on the Bread of Life, and to be ready to follow him at all costs.” Instead they hover together in an upstairs locked room, “frightened [like little] rabbits behind

closed-bolted-shut doors...hoping that no one in town will know that they're there." "They've got no plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing... [and, oh, yeh, I suppose it doesn't help that they've got no parking lot either (they say a good parking lot is the #1 requisite for a growing church).] Not the kind of advertisement one would want for the very first church, is it?

Well, guess what? "So what." Jesus comes to them—Locked doors and all...barriers up, fear high. Jesus comes to them, just as a good shepherd does, seeking out his lost sheep. He tells them, "*Peace be with you*" for a reason. He's not holding anything against them, but giving them direction and empowerment. He's proving that their doubts of him are ungenerous and wrong. He wants them to know that whatever they have done and whatever they might have been, he still trusts them, still believes in them, and wants them to take it in that God's love is bigger than sin, big enough to cover their case, cover their needs, cover their mistakes. I've shared with children how Jesus is like a giant Gumby doll, whose arms and legs can stretch all around the world, holding the planet into his body with forgiveness and love for us all.

When Jesus breathes upon them, he breathes into them the same empowerment of the Holy Spirit that he was given, that he said Yes to. It's the same breath breathed into each of us giving us the breath of life as told in Genesis. But the only way the breath can be recognized as his breath is to use it just as he did, ie., bestowing upon them the awesome power to forgive sins...calling them to walk in the same forgiveness as Jesus did.

Now, at our Bible Study we took focus on this passage's specific concept of forgiveness. We all understand that we're "suppose" to do it...mostly because Jesus did. But we feel that we don't have the same capacity *to* forgive that Jesus did, yet, we do. Where our stuck-ness comes in, is when we believe that to forgive is to condone...that when we forgive someone for something that we are condoning what they did. Let's be clear, when we forgive, never are we condoning.

A definition for forgiveness could be -- giving up my right to hurt you, for hurting me. It is impossible to live on this fallen planet without getting hurt, offended, misunderstood, lied to, and rejected. Learning how to *respond* properly is one of the basics of the Christian life. Christianity teaches us how to live. And in today's passage is the one tool, according to Jesus, we need. Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not saying that things are okay now, and then going back into an abusive situation. It is not letting someone off the hook by saying, "You didn't do

anything wrong.” Some people think that forgiveness is unconditional love with no boundaries or accountability. It is not. Forgiveness is not denial that a hurtful situation exists, either...and it’s NOT denying the fact that your feelings are hurt. And as mentioned, forgiveness does not mean you accept the person’s behavior.

I think the best description of forgiveness is this: Forgiveness is what you give to the past, TRUST is what you give to the future. Just because you’ve forgiven someone does not mean you would choose to trust them in the future. Forgiveness is what you give to the past.

### **A prayer of forgiveness**

Dear God, I am willing, regardless of my feelings, to forgive the person who has wronged me. I release them, and I set myself free to Your healing. With Your help, I will no longer dwell on the situation or continue to talk about it. I thank You for forgiving me as I have forgiven them. I thank You for releasing me. I ask this in Jesus’ name, amen.

So when Jesus breathes upon them the power to forgive sins, we would have to see that Jesus is giving them, really, the only “tool” he seems to think they need in order to move forward as disciples—the choice to forgive and to teach others to do the same. Have they done so? They must have, or we wouldn’t have the church today. The church is the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. And the resurrection of Jesus would not have occurred had Jesus not forgiven his murderers on the cross. (slow) Jesus enabled God’s power to raise him from the dead because he moved any *unforgiveness* out of the way of love’s perfect healing.

The church today says that the disciples went on to forgive as they were forgiven...it says that Jesus HAS returned in the church as the embodiment of the Body of Christ. We are that embodiment, and how spiritual we are *or are not* is dependent on how forgiving we have been, or not. Forgiving of what? I don’t know...you tell me? We all have things to forgive that we don’t even know we haven’t forgiven yet. But we can get a glimpse of our *unforgiveness* by looking at ourselves and seeing what it is that seems to keep coming back into our lives; what it is that we seem to be head strong and unrelenting about; what is it that causes us to focus so much on that it has taken away much of our focus on God? If you can identify those things you can begin to expose the places of unforgiveness in your lives, and thus finally begin to free yourself from the prison of unforgiveness. It’s why Jesus says “Peace be with you.” He knows you can obtain it through this act of love he has so beautifully taught us, and teaches us still, for he continues to

come to us—even behind our locked doors of unforgiveness—he continues to come to us.

Let us pray: Oh God, Jesus' resurrection is not too good to be true, and we give you thanks. Help us to feel his promise of "peace be with you" so we may forgive ourselves and others for the times we have wandered far from you Love. Bless our discipleship in our lives and in this your church that we may be the people you have created us to be. In Jesus name we pray.