

There was once a little boy who, along with his sister, was visiting his grandparents' farm. On his first day there his grandfather gave him a slingshot. He was excited to have it, and over the next few afternoons he practiced his shot in the adjacent woods, though he was not a good shot at all.

One afternoon he found himself in the barnyard, and his grandmother's pet duck was waddling through. He decided to see if he could scare the duck with a shot from his slingshot, never imagining that anything bad would happen. He let a shot hurl through the air. To his great surprise he hit the duck, and it fell down, dead.

In a panic he ran across the barnyard, picked up the duck, and hid it in the woodpile. Still nervous, he looked around, and he saw his sister standing there. She had seen the whole thing. She turned around without saying a word, and walked away.

That night, after dinner, the grandmother asked the young girl to help with the dishes, "Oh," said the girl, "Billy told me he was going to help you." She looked at her brother, and whispered to him, "Remember the duck."

The next day the grandfather asked both children if they wanted to go fishing. The sister spoke up and said, "Billy told me he wanted to spend the day with you grandma." She then walked out the door to join her grandfather in the truck but not before she murmured to her brother, "Remember the duck."

This went on for several days until Billy couldn't take it anymore, and he went to his grandmother, and confessed the whole ordeal. "I saw the whole thing," his grandmother said, "and I forgive you. I was just curious how long you were going to let your sister make you her slave."

This morning we have Jesus telling his disciples about forgiving, and retaining sins. We might understand the idea of forgiving sins, but retaining sins is rather peculiar. What does this mean? Is it like Billy's sister holding the memory of the poor duck over his head? Is that the way God deals with us?

Well, we could read this passage as a commissioning, as Jesus empowering his disciples to be apostles. He could be giving them authority not just to be followers, but leaders; ones who preach peace to those who are far off, and those who are near, and ones who have the power to forgive sins... or not.

There is debate among theologians, and liturgical scholars over whether these verses are the basis of the sacrament of reconciliation. It is from these verses that many believe the Church has the authority for her ministers to pronounce God's forgiveness.

But perhaps there is a much simpler, pedestrian, and yet, more difficult meaning to this passage. Maybe this isn't a commissioning at all but one of Jesus' last teachings about what it means to be a follower of his.

We have heard this passage before. We heard this passage the Sunday after Easter. In fact, we hear this passage every year on the Sunday after Easter, except it is a bit longer. On the Sunday after Easter we also hear an additional part of the reading: Thomas, and his doubts.

But, this morning we only hear the verses that set Thomas' doubts in context. All the disciples were in that locked room, except for Thomas, when Jesus made his appearance, and proclaimed

peace. But this passage is about more than Thomas', and our struggles, with doubt.

Here, at the end of John's Gospel, from the beginning of the Easter season to its end, the Church is given Jesus' proclamation: Peace be with you. A little careful study of this passage shows that this proclamation of peace is central to Jesus' Easter message. There are only three times in the Gospel of John that Jesus says those words. He says them only after his resurrection, and only to his most dedicated followers.

Perhaps *that* is the commission that his followers received. Perhaps that is the commission *we* have received; that peace will be among *us*. But, what does this have to tell us about the forgiving, and retaining of sins?

Let us recall that as Jesus moved through his last week, on the night before he died, John tells us, he gathered his disciples together for one last dinner. In his gospel, John does not focus on the Eucharist. Instead, John chooses to focus on Jesus' teachings and humility. At the last supper in John, Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, and he told them: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

As he prepared for his death and resurrection, Jesus called his followers to humble and sacrificial love. Later, as he stood before them resurrected on Easter he proclaimed peace, wholeness, welfare, and concord. It is worth noting that within the span of eight verses our resurrected Lord says three times, "Peace be with you."

Perhaps, then, what Jesus says about forgiving, and retaining of sins is not really about spiritual authority, but about spiritual health. Maybe what Jesus was most concerned about was

forgiveness rather than the power of the Church! Perhaps Jesus is telling his beloved friends that the way to love, the way to live in peace, is to forgive.

Jesus' words at the last supper: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," could just as well read, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if forgive one another."

Eugene Peterson, in his provocative interpretation of the Bible called, "The Message" renders Jesus' words this morning as follows:

If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive them, what are you going to do with them?"

"Peace be with you," we hear Jesus say this morning. It is a proclamation, and it is an invitation. It is a command, and it is a blessing. It is our commission and our reward. It is how everyone will know we are his disciples.