

The Rt. Rev. Sam Rodman, September 17th 2003, Proper 19 Yr A

There is a question that seems to pop up again and again in different forms these days: "Is the Church back from Covid?" And of course, some would add "Are we even past Covid?"

The results are mixed, about Covid and about the church. Recent articles and surveys indicate that giving is up and attendance is all over the map. But when on-line numbers are included it seems as though the impact of the pandemic on our churches is not as bad as many had feared.

In my prayers for our churches I have been getting a consistent message, that I trust is from the Holy Spirit, as we look ahead and try to regain our momentum in our passion for mission and the gospel promises – Lead with JESUS

In other words keep our focus where it needs to be, where it has always been, on the one who is at the very center of our faith and life together – Jesus.

As someone has put it: the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. For the church - Jesus is the main thing. And our responsibility, our mission, is to put Jesus and his message of love first, in all that we say and do.

But there is another way to hear this invitation to lead with Jesus. In addition to putting Jesus first, we are also called to Lead WITH Jesus. In other words, remember that we are not alone. That in all we say and do as church, Jesus is beside us, and among and within us. Jesus is at the heart of our life together. He is the author and the source of the love he calls us to embody. As a church we need to remember that we are called to LEAD WITH Jesus.

When we lead WITH Jesus, we don't need to have all the answers, we just need to look to him for help, for guidance, for assurance. Jesus is showing us the way forward.

Forgiveness, it turns out, does not come to us naturally. The great spiritual teacher and writer Henry Nowen once said: "Forgiveness is God's gift to us who love poorly." Don Henley of the Eagles put it this way, in a song: "I've been tryin to get down to the heart of the matter, but my will gets weak and my thoughts seem to scatter, but think its about forgiveness, forgiveness..."

Our readings this morning make this point, as well. The beautiful story from Genesis about Joseph and his brothers takes the awful account of Joseph being sold into slavery by his older siblings and turns it on its head when he forgives them and, in fact, saves his whole family from a devastating famine.

Today's account includes one of my favorite lines from the Old Testament when Joseph says: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ..." or, as another translation has it – "God meant it for good." God takes destructive and sinful actions and somehow, in spite of us, brings good out of them.

This principle of bringing good out of something horrible and cruel and violent, is connected to the message of Jesus from the cross when he speaks the words: "Father forgive them, for thy know not what they do."

Jesus models for us what forgiveness looks like. And forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel promise. That is why when Peter asks how often he should forgive someone, Jesus responds, not 7 times, but 70 times 7.

This is not a word problem. Jesus is not asking Peter to do the math. He is showing Peter that forgiveness is absolutely necessary in human relationships. A reality that will come home to roost later in the story, when Peter denies Jesus three times before the cock crows, and Jesus forgives him.

And maybe even more important, we can make mistakes. At the heart of the gospel promise is that we are not expected to get it right the first time. When we try a new initiative, when we reach out to a person with the message of the gospel, or to a partner in the community to try and address the needs of our neighbor, we may make a mistake here and there, but all is not lost. We are forgiven. This is God's promise, God's gift to us, embodied in Jesus.

Of course, none of us likes to make a mistake, or to be reminded we have fallen short. I was in a conversation this week when someone brought up a conflict I had years ago with a member of our clergy. It was a difficult and painful time. And I was surprised how much it hurt to be reminded of the situation, even though, in the end, we were able to work through our differences and recognize that forgiveness was something we both needed in order to heal our relationship, and to reconcile.

Bishop Curry has challenged us to become a church that looks like Jesus. At the heart of the love that Jesus shows us, again and again, is the gift and promise of forgiveness.

Jesus is the consummate teacher, and he helps us learn from our mistakes. As our collect this morning reminds us: O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts;

In other words, we not only Lead with Jesus, we LOVE WITH Jesus, we lean into Jesus' teaching and we follow his example. To lead WITH Jesus means to learn to forgive, to forgive each other, and to forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness is the currency of the Kingdom of God. It is our bread and butter. It is the hallmark of beloved community. Without forgiveness there is no church.

Of course, God's forgiveness is not just for the church, but for the whole world. Wherever we find forgiveness we see the promise of redemption, of God bringing good out of the worst we can do to one another.

In the Jewish tradition, yesterday was Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. The chance for a new beginning, a fresh start. All of which is the fruit of forgiveness.

There is a story you may know from the end of World War II about the Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbrück. When the camp was liberated a note was found pinned to the body of one of those who had been killed. This was what the note said:

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us – remember instead the fruits we have brought thanks to our suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. And when those who have inflicted suffering on us come to judgement, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.

Forgiveness is that greatness of heart that goes above and beyond what we would imagine is possible. It is the ultimate expression of love. The love that Jesus shows us, that he embodied for us.

When we lead with Jesus, when we love like Jesus, when we forgive like Jesus, we become the community we called to become – God's beloved community ... AMEN.