

Second Sunday of Easter

A WOUNDED LORD MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

John 20:19-31

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Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples,

which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

*Author's Note: This pericope is appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter every year, probably because of its chronological reference ("a week later..."). But there's more to it than that. In his excellent pastoral and theological commentary *Wounded Lord: Reading John through the Eyes of Thomas* (Cascade Books, 2009), Prof. Robert Smith suggests that John's account of this encounter between Jesus and Thomas makes the point of the entire Gospel. "To believe in this Jesus" (i.e. the Jesus whose wounds Thomas demanded to see), writes Smith, "means to take him, wounds and all, into our own lives. To believemeans to participate in Christ's own suffering on behalf of the true life of the world through the wounded Christ."*

DIAGNOSIS: No Peace

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Behind Locked Doors (No Peace)*

What on earth were those disciples still doing behind locked doors a week after Easter?! We might excuse them for having locked the doors the previous week, on Easter evening, before the Risen One had appeared to them, but the point is that he had appeared to them that evening. He had extended a greeting of peace to them (twice, in fact); he had even shown them his hands and his side, and had sent them out to do some forgiving.

So what are they doing, still sitting on their apostolic duffs, all locked up? (Even though NRSV translates it with two different words, the word in v. 26 is the same as in v. 19: κεκλεισμένων – "being locked, barred, shut," suggesting that

their situation had not changed from one week to the next.) John tells us that they had been “joyful” seeing the Lord, but apparently that joyfulness had not translated into going out and doing the forgiving they had been sent to do. So, what’s the problem?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Afraid (No Faith – ἀπιστος)

The writer blurts it out. The doors were locked for fear of the Judeans. “How could that be?” we want to say. What more did they need than those death marks that he had shown them? Those wounds were the indicators that he had been willing to go the distance for them. He had received those death wounds because he kept offering God’s own forgiveness to all, including them – and here he was, alive and well and showing off those wounds! What more did they need to unlock those doors and get out of there to start living life with joy and peace, offering to others what Jesus had given to them and sent them out to offer to others? But their fear kept them from making use of the Risen One, as if he had not been raised at all.

We should know how that works. After all, we replicate the locked up behavior of those disciples often enough – living fearful lives, hesitating to forgive, hesitating to extend ourselves for the sake of others, acting as if life were ours to keep for ourselves rather than to receive as gift and then to share with others. What keeps us from living that way but fear – fear that it will get us nothing but crucified. And what is fear but being without faith (ἀπιστος)?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Having NO LIFE

The trouble is, if we will not have the life God offers, we will end up having no life at all. If our fear keeps us from living a life of loving service, we will have so disconnected ourselves from the life of God that our existence will be nothing but a

death-ward drift. We will have to live (which is to say “die”) with the choices we’ve made. “Condemned” is the word Jesus uses in 3:18 to describe it.

PROGNOSIS: The Peace of Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Having the LIFE of the Resurrected One (i.e. the life of him who was crucified and raised)*

God was willing to die, though, before letting us end up with no life at all. Why else does Jesus keep showing disciples his wounds, even after he’s risen, if not to make that clear! These wounds are the result of his offering us his forgiveness in exchange for our (fearful/faithless/ sinful) choices. The death wounds are his because that’s where his love for us took him. And he regards them as the marks of his glory (cf. chap. 17). They are the marks of his persistent love for us. Aren’t you glad that Jesus is so eager for everyone (including Thomas) to see them! They are our assurance that God not only desires for us to “have life” in his name, but that God was also willing to pay the price to make it happen.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Having FAITH (πιστός) – “My Lord and My God”*

Thomas saw those wounds and believed. Good for Thomas. Good for Thomas for wanting to see those wounds in the first place, because they are essential. But most of all, good for Thomas that the wounded Lord didn’t hesitate to show his wounds to Thomas – didn’t even wait to be asked. And that’s just what Thomas needed in order to believe, i.e. to trust Jesus when he offered him forgiveness and life. (And good for us that Jesus keeps showcasing his Risen Body, wounds and all, to us, too, again and again – “Take, eat...my body...” – so that we can have what we need to trust him when he offers us forgiveness and life.)

Note what Thomas says (it's the climax of the gospel) when he sees the death wounds: "My Lord and my God!" It's more than mere recognition that it really is Jesus. It's a statement of faith. Thomas trusts that Jesus, who died for him, is his owner (Lord) and his God. So, now what is there to fear!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Moving out in Peace*

When our owner (Lord) gets through to us how dear we are to God (as he did to Thomas) – we make use of his resurrection. We believe him. In fact, we who "have not seen" may be even more blessed in our believing than was Thomas, given that we (unlike Thomas) are surrounded with so many others who also believe. (Thanks to Jerome Burce for this insight.)

And with believing comes living. It's inevitable. We are told that Thomas served by bringing the message to India, undoubtedly speaking of those wounds and of their significance all along the way. So we find ways to bring the life of the Risen One to others, offering them his peace, his forgiveness, his healing, his Spirit, so that they, too, may trust him and, trusting, may have life in his name.