[Acts 2:1-21](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=47" \l "hebrew_reading" \t "_blank)

Psalm 46

[1 Corinthians 12:3b-13](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=47#epistle_reading)

[John 20:19-2](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=47#gospel_reading)3

Sermon for June 4 2017

We're going to begin today by reminding ourselves of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. The word 'gospel' is just an old English way of saying 'good news,' so we're going to begin by reminding ourselves of what the good news about Jesus is, what news it was that the early apostles began bringing to the world around them, which then spread to an ever wider and wider world, and continues to spread even today. We hear the phrase used so much and so easily that I think we sometimes tend to forget exactly what it is, and how remarkable it is to those who hear it for the first time. So it's good to remind ourselves occasionally, and I also think it will be helpful for us as we look at our gospel reading for today.

So here it is. The good news about Jesus has two parts. The first is that the glorified human spirit of the still living Jesus - which in the New Testament is frequently referred to as the Holy Spirit - is given freely and lives within every person who accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In the usual way the writers of the New Testament put it, Jesus Christ is in you, or the Holy Spirit is in you. That's part one of the good news. Part two is that everyone who accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior is incorporated into the spiritual body of the still living and glorified Jesus. As those same writers usually say it, you are in Jesus Christ, or sometimes, you are members of the body of Jesus Christ, of the glorified Jesus.

And that's it. That's the entire Gospel. The good news about Jesus is not the various facts about his life, that he performed miracles and did some wonderful things and offered many great and profound teachings. Those are facts about Jesus, but they are not what the New Testament writers meant by the good news. The good news - the news that leads to your salvation, is the promise that, if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then His own spirit will come and dwell in you, and you yourself will begin to dwell in Him, as members of His spiritual body, which we often call the Church.

I think it's helpful to have that little refresher course in mind as we look at our Bible readings for this morning. Although we won't be doing it in this message today, if you go back and read the passage from 1 Corinthians with that refresher course in mind, I think you will quickly see that in some verses Paul is talking about part one of the gospel - Christ in you - and in other verses he's talking about part two - you in Christ.

Nor are we going to dwell on the lengthy passage from the book of Acts, the one that your three Stooges - excuse me, your three pastors - so eloquently mangled together. I'll only say about it that, as I read it, the great event that we celebrate as Pentecost is about the role the Spirit of God plays in part two of the gospel, us in Christ. And what it describes is the occasion on which the Spirit of God empowers the body of Christ, the Church, to enable its great mission of spreading the Good News about Jesus to the whole world.

For today, though we are going to look at the short Gospel passage from John, and I'm really looking forward to it, because I think there's a good chance that, after having really absorbed what it says, that we will all walk out of church today feeling more empowered than we have ever felt in our lives. We may even be a little bit in awe of ourselves.

In broadcasting, that's called a tease. So, let's read the passage together.

*Read John 20: 19-23*

In discussing this remarkable passage, first we have to think a moment about forgiveness, and I'm going to give you an example to illustrate what forgiveness is and what it isn't. Suppose I'm driving home late one night and I'm distracted and I turn into my neighbor's driveway and run into the back of her car and do minor damage. Suppose she hears the noise and runs out, and I'm of course apologizing as we inspect the damage. Nothing huge, maybe a few hundred dollars; it wouldn't even reach the insurance deductible.

But suppose I happen to be in a desperate financial situation at the moment, so desperate that even a few hundred dollars would be the straw that broke my back, and suppose my neighbor is aware of my situation.

So she says to me, "Listen, let's just forgive and forget this. Don't worry, it's not that big a deal. I'll take care of it."

What has she done here? She's forgiven me. She's taken responsibility for what is rightfully my debt. That's what forgiveness is, relieving somebody else of something they owe. Forgiveness cancels the debt.

That's what forgiveness does, but - and here's the important point - notice what it does not do. It' cancels the debt, but it doesn't cancel the cost. That fender will still have to be repaired, and somebody will still have to pay for it. What my neighbor's forgiveness of me is, in essence, is her taking a burden off of me and transferring it onto her own shoulders. And if you think about it, that's what all forgiveness is, in essence: it's not the elimination of a burden, but the transfer of a burden from one person to another.

This is easy to visualize when we're speaking of financial forgiveness like the illustration in our story. It's much harder to visualize in the case of other kinds of forgiveness. But, in essence, what it means to forgive remains the same in all cases.

If someone wrongs you by knowingly hurting you in a way that runs contrary to God's will, forgiveness consists in you accepting all the pain of that mistreatment, and not retaliating, not demanding that the person who wronged you 'balance the books.' It means you balance them yourself, by absorbing the pain into yourself, It means treating that person as if it had never happened. It means transferring the responsibility for making it right again between the two of you onto your own shoulders.

But you say, Wait a minute here! They deserve to pay for what they did to me! They were in the wrong! I'm the innocent party here! How can I just act like it never happened? They have to suffer something like I did due to them. That's only right! Simply forgiving them...that's just too hard.

Well yes, yes, it is hard. Just like it was hard for my neighbor to pay for the damage I did to her car. It cost her something. But that's the point. Forgiveness - true forgiveness - always has a cost, and the cost is always born by the one who forgives. Otherwise it's just empty words, as meaningless as standing on a street corner to pray, so that everyone can see how pious you are.

Now all that is just worldly truth. But Christ teaches us that's there's another, and deeper, spiritual truth about forgiveness. Christ teaches us that when we sin against another - to use the old religious language - when we cause harm to someone else through acting in some way contrary to how God would have us act, Christ teaches us that when we do that, we harm not only the other perrson, but we also harm God himself.

Christ tells us in the 25th chapter of Matthew, in the great parable of the sheep and the goats, speaking of our behavior towards others, "Whatever you do [even] to the least of these, you do to Me." (v. 40) The spiritual harm we do to others indebts us not just to them, but also to God Himself.

Now come with me a step deeper. During His ministry, Jesus often forgave people, in our financial imagery, He forgave them their debts. But we just saw that wronging others creates two spiritual debts, one to the victim and the other to God. Which debt was Jesus forgiving?

Obviously not the debt the sinner owes to the victim, the pain and the outrage of the victim still remains, and only the victim can forgive that, can accept the burden of that and not demand recompense from the sinner. Not even God can forgive that debt.

The debt Jesus was forgiving was the debt owed to God by the sinner.

When Paul tells us that Jesus died for our sins, when he says of Jesus in Colossians 1 that in him, we have 'redemption, the forgiveness of sins,' he's not saying that we, as Christians, are off the hook for the pain and sorrow we've inflicted and will yet inflict on others. He's saying that, as Christians, the debt we owe God has been paid by Jesus.

When Jesus cries out from the cross, "Father, forgive them," the forgiveness He is imploring of the Father is not for the behavior of the onlookers towards each other, but for their behavior towards Him, the Son, who is God Himself.

We could of course go on at great length about this, but for today we'll leave it there because we want to get to the great promise I teased earlier. If you'd like to explore all this in greater detail, I'd suggest attendance at BS.

But returning now to our Gospel passage from John, I'm going to read again and ask you to try to appreciate the stupendous authority and responsibility Jesus bestows upon His disciples, immediately after having breathed upon them and having bestowed the Holy Spirit upon them.

*If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*

The passage, I believe, represents the incorporation of the first disciples into the body of Christ, part two of the Gospel, just as we all, at a later date, have been incorporated into the body of Christ. And what it's telling us is that we, just like those first disciples, that we also have the authority to forgive sins, the exact same authority Jesus had.

But remember what forgiveness is. It is a bearing of the cost for what someone else has done. And remember which cost it is. It is the cost that otherwise must be borne by God.

What Christ was teaching us is this. As Christians, we are given an extraordinary privilege, the same privilege Jesus Himself was given. It is the privilege of canceling the debt that others owe to God. The only difference is that Jesus canceled it for all of humanity. We can cancel it only for those who harm and damage us.

But remember, forgiveness comes at a cost. The cost is paying the debt, bearing the burden, suffering the pain, yourself, instead of demanding it of those who wronged you. That means not just walking up to someone who's hurt you and not just saying, "You done me wrong, but I forgive you." It means treating them as if they never done you wrong at all.

Is that hard? It sure is. Do your instincts revolt against it? They sure do. Does your sense of justice and fairness scream out "No way, Jose!" It sure does. But that's the cost of forgiveness.

But the good news is, that in Christ, absorbing that cost cancels that person's debt to God Almighty. And I preach to you, on the authority of Scripture, that there is no greater privilege in all of creation.

And so, gracious God, we pray this morning for a deeper understanding and appreciation of this remarkable gift, perhaps the most significant of all the gifts Christ offers us, the gift of forgiveness, not only that Christ forgives us, but even more, that Christ offers us, as Christians, the opportunity and responsibility of sharing in the forgiveness of others, and thus relieving some small part of the burden Christ bears for the whole world. We ask in full sincerity that you forgive us our debts, and enable us as we strive to forgive the debts of others, for we ask it in Christ’s name and for Christ’s sake. Amen.