

You know ... if snarling at other people was a virtue, these days our cup would runneth over with saints. In the press, on the street, in emails, and certainly in social media, is constant harangue: “The sky is blue!” “You moron; it’s turquoise!” “Fool! It’s azure!!” Or: “Nazi! How dare you disagree with me by making a wholly reasonable and logical argument!!” Sigh. Agreement seems as rare as a snowball in...August. And we wonder why we can’t achieve world peace. Duh.

Ah ... peace; how desirable, yet how very elusive. We long for peace in our homes, at our work, in our nation, on earth. In our hearts. That’s why Jesus’ words in our Gospel at our Catholic Mass this weekend (John 20:19-31) speaks to our very core.

A quick recap: Only hours after professing to go even to death for Him, the apostles all ran off when Jesus came under actual threat—He being arrested and hauled before a kangaroo court of chief priests and elders envious of His popularity. Jesus, of course, would be unjustly condemned by Pontius Pilate and finally crucified, only to rise from the dead on Easter Sunday, appearing first to His dedicated women followers at the tomb.

It’s at this point that we join the narrative. Fear and doubt fill the minds of the apostles, who are cowering in hiding, no doubt fearful of a continued purge of Jesus’ disciples. “Will we, too, be crucified?” they must be thinking. And now this report of Jesus coming back to life ... after they had abandoned Him in the crucial moment! “Cowardly, faithless followers were we!” they may have cried.

And then ... Jesus comes among them, unhindered by physical barriers—indicative of supernatural ability. Gulp. Has He come in fury at their abandonment ... to avenge their faithlessness ... to blast them with divine power? No; rather...

“Peace be with you.”

Well ... imagine the flood of emotion in THAT room! Shock. Disbelief. Relief. Confusion. Uncertainty. Fear. Joy.

A very interesting point, though, is that Jesus’ first subsequent action is to breathe the Holy Spirit upon the apostles to give them ability to forgive or retain sins—forgiveness to bring peace, retention to urge toward conversion, eventual forgiveness and then peace. After all, as St. Paul reminds us, God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), and God says through the prophet: “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” (Ezekiel 33:11)

That Gospel from John is one of the strongest bases for the Catholic sacrament of confession, along with Jesus’ words to Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19) Often we priests hear: “Well...I don’t have to go to a man to be forgiven by God! A priest is as sinful as I am!!” That may be true, but I can’t help but recall the prophet Elisha instructing the foreign leper Naaman to bathe in the river Jordan to be healed. Naaman protested: “I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leprosy. Are not...the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” (2 Kings 5:11-12) In other words, he expected God to act per his own expectations. Yet, after some convincing by his servants, Naaman finally humbles himself and bathes in the Jordan’s muddy water, and only then is healed. Likewise, we Catholics believe that God’s grace comes through the “muddy” mediation of the priest ... much as sunlight remains pure even through a dirty window.

We Catholics also recall that, in the Old Testament, offerings for sin were through the mediation of a Jewish priest. “When a man is guilty...he shall confess the sin he has committed, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD... and the priest shall make atonement for him...” (Leviticus 5:6) And: “When a man or woman commits any of the sins that men commit...he shall confess his sin...” (Numbers 5:6) And much later, after the Exile and with their return to Jerusalem: “...the people of Israel...stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.” (Nehemiah 9:1-2) Then, at the Jordan with John the Baptist, the people: “...were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:6) So confessing sins is nothing new, but something even from the beginning of the worship of God. In it we are reconciled with God in cherished peace. There is something hard-wired within us that wants to admit to our wrong, and only then do we find the peace that otherwise eludes us.

Very often we hear the slogan: “No justice, no peace!” But even more essentially, Jesus emphasizes a great truth: “No forgiveness, no peace.” Grudges and hatred are poison to the soul ... forgiveness—given or received—the prescriptive balm. Very often we priests and ministers encounter those (sometimes even ourselves) who have held pointless grudges for years and decades for even minor slights and offenses, the “offended” finding some sort of perverse pleasure in a false self-righteousness. Yet all the while his spirit decays in the false promise of pride—pride being perhaps the first sin, for Eve wanted to “be like God.” That’s what WE want when we expect people to crawl before we’ll deign to forgive.

For the Christian at least, such an attitude is opposite of what Jesus teaches ... and lives. Did He not readily forgive all humanity when He cried: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) Therefore, O Christian ... do you still refuse to forgive? If we rebel against the teaching of Jesus, do we not “abandon” Him as did the apostles, preferring our own pride instead? Does He not teach us the prayer: “...forgive us our trespasses, AS WE FORGIVE those who trespass against US?” Go reread Matthew 6 and 18.

Certainly we work for justice, for INjustice invariably leads to resentment, hatred and even war. But we also have to be spiritually big enough to recognize inevitable human fallibility, and dare rise above emotional reaction to seek reconciliation and peace per God’s own desire and command. Yes, human fallibility is a two-edged sword, because try as we might, we may have difficulty forgiving. But forgiving is an act of the will, and thus it is within our ability to do so. Read Immaculée Ilibagiza’s account, for example, of learning to forgive even those who butchered her family. Few are called to do as much. We may not forget, but we can forgive nonetheless. And imagine Our Lord’s joy when He hears us say to one another His own words: “Peace be with you.”