

Wednesday of Oculi, A ✕ D 2010
John 20:19-23

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 Nearly everyone from Oprah and Dr. Phil to secular and quasi-Christian therapists to WebMD and Livestrong.com suggest you would do well to forgive yourself. It is easier, they contend, to forgive others. To forgive yourself, to assuage your own guilt, to absolve yourself, well, that's a little trickier. But if you're going to find healing, you need to learn to do it. So say the self-help books, even the Christian self-help guides. Nearly everyone is urging you to forgive yourself. Nearly everyone, that is, except Jesus.

2 Scared and guilty, the ten men huddled together in fear in the upper room on the first day of the week. Had they been here all three days? From what are they hiding? From the Jews? From those who crucified their Lord? This is what fear does. It isolates, it separates men from one another. It sends sinners looking for cover. Adam and Eve sought fig leaves, then fled from God altogether. Palms sweaty, stomachs knotted, nerves on edge, looking over their shoulders at every sound, these men gathered in the upper room three days after the crucifixion of their Lord don't need a lesson in self-help or self-forgiveness.

3 Is their story not also yours? Don't you try to hide your sin away, locked in an upper room where no one else knows about it? There, by yourself, it's easier to rationalize, easier to justify, easier to explain away sin. "It could have been worse." "I'm not as bad as those others." "Anyone else would have done the same." "I have needs to be filled." "I deserved a break." So you blame your sin on others. You conjure excuses. You flee to the upper room of your own construction and try to hide there.

4 But locked doors don't keep Jesus out. Fig leaves don't really hide sin. God knows where Adam is hiding even when He calls out to him. No excuse or lie can obscure your sin from the all-seeing gaze of God. You need forgiveness, to be sure, but it doesn't come from inside you. Forgiveness from yourself is hollow and useless. Your sins, while they directly affect you, are not chiefly against yourself. Your guilty conscience is not a sign of an inability to forgive yourself, but the proof that self-forgiveness is not the cure. You need forgiveness from the One you have wronged. Every sin is idolatry at its core. Every transgression is ultimately self-worship, replacing the God who created you with yourself the creature. So you need forgiveness, not from the one you have replaced the One true God with—yourself—but from that God Himself the love of whom you have displaced with love of yourself.

5 Learn to confess with David, "Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that You may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Repent. There is no excuse that works, no blame that will deflect the accusation of the Law.

6 When the crucified and risen Jesus enters the locked upper room, He does not replay the scene from Eden. He doesn't call out looking for His disciples, even after they fled in the garden. He has no anger, no wrath for them. All the wrath of God was spent, poured out on Him, three days earlier. He comes not to speak condemnation by mercy. "Peace be with you."

When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. These are for you. The scars, the crucifixion, the death, the outpouring of the wrath of God on the Son of God, all of these were for you. This is what they needed.

7 They didn't need to know how to forgive themselves. They needed forgiveness from the Lord they had abandoned in the garden, from the Teacher whose teaching they had stubbornly resisted, from the God who called them to follow Him. His word "Peace" is His "I forgive you." Not "You guys need to pull it together and forgive yourselves, but I forgive you.

8 And then He said it again: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." With that He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." This word of Peace is not for them. It's for you. He sends these men out to deliver the forgiveness He won by His death on the cross. The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent."

9 It's not up to you. Forgiving yourself is not what matters. Receiving the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross, having your sins forgiven by the God whom those sins offended, against whom those sins rebelled, is what matters. And so that you might have this comfort, so that you might receive this gift, so that your ears might hear what you cannot ever say to yourself, Jesus created an office. Through this office, as through the means of water and bread and wine, Jesus forgives your sins. That's what you need more than anything else.

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Pastor Jeff Hemmer