

Sunday, May 8, 2011
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Sermon – Mother's Day

At one point in my early twenties I had made some poor choices. I found myself in Tampa, Florida, in July with no job, no place to live and very little money. I called my mother, in Connecticut, from a payphone in a Laundromat crying about my misfortune. My mother listened to me for a bit and then in her kind and gentle voice simply said, "Come home."

"Come home."

No recriminations, no judgments, no malice, just plain and simple unconditional love. That love sustained me on that long drive from Tampa, Florida to Ridgefield Connecticut. That love welcomed and enfolded me in a place where I could feel secure. That same unconditional love prompted my mother to let me know that I was welcome at home as long as I needed to stay, but was expected to find a job and start paying rent after two weeks. That love shaped me for the rest of my life, allowing me to take risks, always knowing that I was sustained by my mother's love.

Unconditional love is a gift.

Sometimes it comes from parents, sometimes from a spouse, sometimes from a dear friend. Some people never experience such love and if you are one of those I want you to know that God offers this love.

God's love for us is unconditional.

In today's reading Jesus' greeting "Peace be with you" is the equivalent of my mother's "Come home".

With these opening words we are reassured that God is a loving God, not a vengeful God. It is reasonable to assume that the disciples might have been just a bit afraid that Jesus appearing among them was not all good news. Jesus might be understandably angry with them for abandoning him, in Peter's case for even denying Jesus three times while Jesus was being questioned by the religious authorities.

It's frightening enough to see someone who was dead suddenly alive, but what if he had every reason to say, "Where were you when I needed you? What kind of faithful disciples are you, anyway? Why did you run out on me? Peter, *you* especially, I picked you out to be the leader; how could you have denied me three times?"

But that's not what happened.

There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an understandable expression of disappointment and hurt. Instead, the first words Jesus offered were both greeting and gift: "Peace be with you." He knew what was in their hearts and why they had barred the door. He saw right through them and knew that they weren't re-grouping, and deciding on how they were going to carry on his legacy or spread his teaching. They were scared and hiding out.

How often do we hide from the things we are afraid of? We hide, both physically and emotionally, from the things in life that cause us fear or uncertainty. We are reluctant to face up to the solemnity or severity of a situation.

Yet, suddenly, in the midst of the disciples fear and confusion, Jesus was there. Not with angels and trumpets, but quietly. He brought only peace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And most importantly, he brought forgiveness.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

We can translate this into Jesus saying, "It's ok. I know you weren't perfect, but it is time to move on. I forgive you for deserting me, denying me, for running away when things got hard. It's ok. I still love you."

Forgiveness is an integral part of unconditional love.

Jesus encourages the disciples to trust in God and the Holy Spirit rather than dwelling on their mistakes and shortcomings. He is saying, "I need you to stop focusing on yourselves and your fear and go out into the world to do the work that I was trying to do." This is the power of unconditional love.

When we know that we are loved, we are less likely to become immobilized by fear and uncertainty. Unconditional love can change us from being self-focused and judgmental to being compassionate.

What Jesus is saying, and what we must hear, is that this is not just about us...we are called to go forth, with our doubts, with our fear, with our own anxiety, into the world to do the work that God created us to do.

He is letting us know that we don't have to go it alone. Our faith today is not really different than that of the disciples. We have our doubts and our fears but we also know that the Holy Spirit is as active in our lives as it was on that day long ago in the locked room. When we don't feel God's presence or recognize the miracles in our daily lives, it is often because we are not paying attention or perhaps not expecting it. God, however, is always with us. We simply must stop and listen. Stop and feel his breath upon us.

Jesus follows his offer of "Peace be with you" by breathing on the disciples, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit." You can't help but wonder what they felt. I wonder if they experienced a transformation when Jesus breathed on them. When Thomas returned, were they noticeably different?

You see, it is not just the experience of feeling God's presence; it is how we receive it that matters. The Hebrew word for "breath of life" is *ruach* which also means, "God's Spirit." In that locked room Jesus breathes on his disciples and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. It is breath that gives life. Breath is a gift from God. It sustains us every moment but is rarely recognized.

There is something incredibly intimate about breathing on someone. This is not something that we generally are conscious of doing. But, if you have ever had a baby fall asleep on your chest, gently breathing into your neck, you know that it is a closeness that cannot be matched. When you sleep next to someone you can often feel them breathing in the night. Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples is an act of love. He could have just told them they would receive

the Holy Spirit, but he breathed it into them. It gives life to the spirit. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit is alive and moving among us each and every day. We can only feel the breath of those who we let get very close to us. We will only feel the Holy Spirit in our lives if we allow God to get close enough to breath on us.

We must identify the barriers that keep us away from this closeness and work to remove them. The barriers may be our busy schedules, our own ambition, indifference to the Spirit, or just too much noise in our lives. For Thomas the barrier was doubt.

He couldn't believe without seeing the risen Christ for himself. Jesus understands and accommodates Thomas' need.

Again, modeling unconditional love, Jesus does not admonish Thomas for needing proof. He simply provides him with the opportunity to see for himself. Jesus does, however, provide a blessing to all who believe though they "have not seen."

That would be us!

We are the beloved children of God, breathed into being and called to be disciples in the world. We are the ones who are charged with the responsibility to share God's gift of the Holy Spirit with others. We have unlimited opportunities to show and share unconditional love.

Think for a moment about the people whom you love the most. Is the love that you have for them unconditional or have you placed restrictions on it. Are you able to give love with no expectation of return, like Jesus does? Do the people in your life know that you love them? Do they feel that you love them unconditionally?

Do you?

Today is mother's day – a holiday created to remind people to acknowledge the love between mothers and their children. Use this day, and the week ahead, to ensure that someone in your life knows they are loved. Extend an invitation to "Come home."

Breathe the Holy Spirit into someone you love.

Peace be with you. Amen.