

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)

**On “Doubting Thomas” and Forgiveness**

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Reflections on  
**John 20:19-31**

**T**oday I want to talk about *forgiveness*, although commenting on the Gospel’s story about *doubting Thomas*, my namesake, is almost irresistible. If only this apostle had lived today, with the Myers-Briggs personality assessment tool available to help us understand him better! On the S-N dichotomy scale, without a hint of prejudice, he would have been rated a *sensate*, rather than an *intuitive*. There’s no disgrace in that!

But look what happened: the Johanine redactor made him a *stooge*. He was set up! Poor, touchy-feely Thomas! With that final jab from the mouth of the risen Christ, “Blessed are those who have *not* seen, and yet believed,” Thomas became forevermore a believer of the second magnitude! Not blessed! *Povero Tommaso!*

But is that the end of the story? Perhaps not. Let’s consider the little matter of *forgiveness*, also addressed in today’s Gospel:

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Contrary to what some Catholics still think, this passage wasn’t originally intended to be a proof-text for the sacrament of Penance, especially for the institutionalized version of it that we cradle Catholics were forced to endure every year under pain of mortal sin.

Remember your Easter duty? We sinners had to describe in lurid detail for the priest how we offended God, ourselves, and our brothers and sisters. Only then would the priest “grant

absolution”—if he were satisfied with our sorrow and our “firm purpose of amendment.”

Nowadays we believe that in the early decades of Christianity, everyone in *every* Christian community was expected to forgive *everyone else*. That’s what our Triduum was all about, starting with our mutual foot washing! Mutual forgiveness was the *sine qua non*—the only way people could form and maintain a viable community.

So in all likelihood, Jesus’ remark that “those whose sins you retain are retained,” while seeming to confer the heady power to *withhold* forgiveness in certain circumstances, might have been a two-edged sword. Could there be a flip-flip logic to it? It’s not unlike this phrase in Matthew: “those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.” Might it have been an understated reminder—maybe even a cautionary message—to the Johanine community about the unfortunate consequences of *not* forgiving one another? Another “Yes, you can go there, but *don’t* go there!” piece of advice?

Let’s think about that for a moment. Could it be that “retaining sin”—holding it against the one who has sinned, especially the one who has hurt us—is bad for us? Is it perhaps a kind of *spiritual* self-abuse?

Where else do we hear of the unfortunate effects of unhealthy “retention”? In medical circles it’s well known. When a patient cannot pass urine, but rather *retains* it, that patient may not have long to live. Holding toxic substances within one’s body—*anuria*—is one of the most common ways to begin the process of dying.

The lesson about forgiving—or *not*—in today’s gospel is but a small part of the larger teachings on

forgiveness found elsewhere in the NT. What comes to mind first would be “the Lord’s prayer,” preserved in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospel, but not in Mark’s or John’s. Do any of you remember the Latin from pre-Vatican II days, when we used to pray:

*dimitte nobis debita nostra,  
sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris;*

Here we asked God to forgive our sins *in the same measure* and *to the same extent* that we forgave those who sinned against us, or offended us. There’s a two-edged lesson in that prayer, too—a fearsome reciprocity. The same passage is sometimes translated “forgive us our *debts*”—what we owe to God, and by extension to our community—in comparison to which, what others may owe us is probably trivial . . . and we can’t take the shekels with us, anyway.

So in the final analysis, when it comes to forgiveness, I think most of us would agree that the *Lord’s prayer* in Matthew and Luke trumps the passage in John’s Gospel about forgiving or retaining the sins of others. In fact, the admonition in Matthew to forgive “seventy times seven” times even trumps the Lord’s prayer!

Shifting our frame of reference to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, I would like to conclude our consideration of forgiveness with some thoughts from the lived experience of Christians of our own generation—from Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho. These words appear in the *Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, where we read (p.23-24):

### **Forgiveness is not a luxury**

Forgiveness is not some airy-fairy thing. It has to do with the real world. Healing and reconciliation are not magic spells. They do not erase the reality of an injury. To forgive is not to pretend that what happened did not happen. Healing does not draw a veil over the hurt. Rather, healing and reconciliation demand an honest reckoning.

For Christians, *Jesus Christ* sets the pattern for forgiveness and reconciliation. He offered his betrayers [and tormentors] forgiveness. Jesus, the son of God, could erase the signs of leprosy; heal those broken in body, mind, and spirit; and restore sight to the blind. He must also have been able to obliterate the signs of the torture and death he endured. But he chose not to erase that evidence.

After the resurrection, he appeared to his disciples. In most instances he showed them his wounds and his scars. This is what healing demands. Behavior that is hurtful, shameful, abusive, or demeaning must be brought into the fierce light of truth. And truth can be brutal. In fact, truth may exacerbate the hurt; it might make things worse. But if we want real forgiveness and real healing, we must face the *real injury*.

We thank you, Apostle Thomas, for *facing* and *touching* the *real* injuries of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. We thank you for your *probing* and *witnessing* and *acknowledging* them. In your simple sensate way, you did him ... and us ... a big favor!  
Amen!

