

A valley girl explains: “Last year I replaced, like, all the windows of my house with those expensive, double-pane, energy-efficient kind. Today, I, like, got a call from the contractor who installed them. He complained that the work had been completed a year ago, and I still hadn’t, like, paid for them. OMG! HELLOOOOO! Just because I’m a valley girl doesn’t mean that I’m, like, automatically stupid! So, I told him just what his fast-talking sales guy told me last year – that these windows would, like, pay for themselves in a year. HELLOOOO? It’s been a year, so they’re, like, paid for, I told him. There was only silence at the other end of the line, so I finally hung up. He never called back. I bet he felt like an idiot.” And that’s your FINAL RISUS PASCHALIS or Easter Joke until next year since Pentecost is the last Sunday of Easter.

First a little background on this gospel text. We tend to think of Pentecost more in line with the first reading from ACTS, about the actual coming of the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire. The Gospel gives us what is known as ‘The Johannine Pentecost,’ an often overlooked but equally wonderful Pentecostal text. John doesn’t connect the Spirit with the Day of Pentecost – the Jewish Feast of Weeks – but rather has it occur on Easter evening.

Now the setting for this climactic event in John’s Gospel is significant. It is night. After a bloody, violent week, the followers of Jesus are cowering behind locked doors *in the dark* for fear of the authorities (20:19). The text says ‘the Jews’ but it is more accurate to understand this as the authorities in order to avoid anti-Jewish stereotypes.

Without warning, the risen Christ intrudes and stands among His fearful followers and says, “Peace to you.” The ‘peace’ is the peace of forgiveness. Though the disciples have behaved in a horrible manner, Jesus returns to them, resumes His conversation with them and, in effect, forgives them. Jesus has already said that the peace He gives is different from that alleged ‘peace’ that the world gives. (14:27).

Then Jesus breathes upon them. Surely John means us to recall that primal act of God breathing life into the first human in the book of Genesis (2:7). I remind you once again that John’s gospel begins with the opening words of the Bible in Genesis “In the beginning.” None of this is accidental. Jesus now breathes the Spirit INTO His followers. It’s like creation all over again, when the Spirit hovered over the waters and enlivening breath was breathed into dust in order to create humankind.

To His followers – cowering behind locked doors, His disappointing disciples – who are as good as dead – Jesus breathes life into them, making a living movement out of the dust that His disciples had become through their cowardice. The Jesus movement is given a new lease on life by the breath of Jesus, just as Adam and Eve were given life by the breath of God. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2020, p. 28-29)

OK, so what? Two points on how this new creation plays out in very concrete situations. A couple of years ago, following a talk I had given, I was asked a series of questions about morality, sin, confession, and forgiveness. I began my response with a few distinctions calculated to show how complex these questions are and was moving on to the next step, an attempt to give some answers, when a man present lost his patience – and his temper.

He challenged me angrily, “Father, why are you fudging around on this? You know the answer, every good Catholic does! Sex outside of marriage, missing mass on Sundays, these are mortal sins, and no

theological or psychological distinctions can change that! You know too, only too well, that the Catholic Church teaches clearly, and has defined at the Council of Trent, that there is only one way to have serious sin forgiven – confession to a priest. Not to say that clearly is to soft-pedal the truth!”

I was trying to figure out how to respond when a lady stood up, shaking and nearly overcome with emotion, and she spoke for me.

“This is not soft-pedaling the truth. I believe what Father is saying about how complicated this is – and I’ll tell you why. I had a 19-year-old daughter who was killed in a car accident 2 years ago. She hadn’t been going to church for over a year before that and she was living with her boyfriend. But she was a good girl, with a good heart, and nobody is going to tell me that she is in hell!”

There is a danger in playing loose with the truth. But there is also a danger the other way – we can dangerously REDUCE the truth. We can soft-pedal the reality and power of the Incarnation of Jesus, the power of His death on a cross out of a universal love for a sinful world, and we can end up making God as small and narrow-minded as we are on our worst days. As if God HAS to act the way we THINK God should act. The scriptures picture a God who is long and lavish on mercy and goes to incredible lengths to bring back anyone who gets lost. Even our doctrine on purgatory says that God never gives up on us – even in the grave!

When we reflect deeply on what Jesus taught us about God, I think the lady who claimed that, despite her daughter’s wanderings and her dying without explicit confession that she was surely not in hell, was speaking a deep truth.

There is a second layer to this, and it’s my final point. There is a lot of pain among us churchgoers today that we seldom talk about. It is the pain of losing a loved one, not through death or even through physical separation, but through the loss of a shared common faith, religious practice and morality.

For example: You are a parent trying to live out your Catholic life in a conscientious way. You come to church regularly, pray, and live a good moral life. When they were young, your children naturally followed you and shared your convictions and practice. Then gradually, or perhaps suddenly, they stopped going to church, stopped sharing your views on sexuality and marriage, and defiantly or apologetically began to live in a way that contradicts what you believe and practice.

At first you probably challenged and fought. You demanded that they come to church and live as Catholics sexually, but to no avail. Eventually, in frustration, you arrived at an unhappy truce; you continued to practice, they did not.

As a priest I have met hundreds of parents who are anxious with worry about their children in this state. However this is not limited to parents worrying about children. It affects grandparents, aunts and uncles, and all of us who have found a treasure in our Catholic faith. There is probably not a single one of us who has not felt the deep pain of loss when a son or daughter, a friend, or a brother or sister who used to walk beside us at church, no longer does.

One of the deepest bondings of all, our Catholic faith, is weakened and strained. We are in pain: both because we feel a sense of loss and personal rejection and because we are worried about the other’s long-term happiness and salvation as well as their long-term bonding with us.

This pain is very common, very deep, and too seldom talked about. How should we react? What can we do as parents, friends, brothers and sisters? What can we do as the Church?

Obviously, we can pray and continue to live out our own lives according to our own deepest convictions, hoping to love and challenge with our lives more than with our words. This is what we must do – and, most times, all we can do.

But it is important to understand what we are really doing when we are about this. Something deeper is happening than is seen on the surface, and it has to do with this feast about a fiery, loving Holy Spirit and this text of John's Gospel.

In John 20:23, Jesus tells the earliest Christian community: "Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained." In Matthew 16:19, Jesus tells Peter: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven."

The traditional interpretation of these texts takes their meaning to refer to the institution of the sacrament of reconciliation and to the giving of the papal powers to Peter and his successors. They mean at least that much, but much more is implied. What Jesus is doing here is giving the **WHOLE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY** the power to forgive sins and the power of binding and loosing. What does this mean concretely?

It means that if we are truly members of Christ's body, then when we forgive sins, the person is forgiven. Likewise, it means that if we love someone and hold them in our life, that person, regardless of his or her own actions, is not cut off from the Body of Christ. If we continue to love somebody, they are bound. Like that lady who had lost her daughter in the car crash – that lady **BOUND** her daughter even more closely now, praying for and loving her.

Hell is only possible when we have put ourselves totally outside of the range of love and forgiveness of the Christian community, when we have rendered ourselves incapable of being loved and forgiven in that we have actively reject not only the religious and moral convictions of the Christian community, but, more importantly, its love.

To make this concrete: If a child, or brother or sister or a loved one of ours strays from the church in terms of practice and morality, as long as we continue to love them, hold them in union and forgive them, they are bound, still part of the church – **BECAUSE OF OUR LOVE!**

Irrespective of their official external relationship to the church and Christian morality they are in grace because we are part of the Body of Christ and when someone touches us, they are healed and forgiven, just as persons at the time of Jesus were healed by touching Him.

When we love someone, unless they actively reject that love, they are bound – bound to the Body of Christ, sustained in salvation.

And this is true even beyond death. If someone close to us dies in a state where, externally at least, he or she is not practicing as a Christian and is at odds morally with the Body of Christ, our love and forgiveness will continue to bind them to the body and will continue to forgive them – even after death. (This all adapted from Rolheiser, *FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES*, p. 165-171)

Now, my friends, **THIS** is an understanding of Church and Gospel and Holy Spirit that is big enough to be of God, and not of our own making. It's fiery, it's mysterious, and it's a deep, abiding, searching kind of love, like that Good Shepherd who left 99 righteous ones and went looking for that one, lost sheep. In our

love, we continue this search for those who have left our beloved Catholic faith. May we spread this fire of love to all of our families, friends, and our entire world. Amen.

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