SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — April 27, 2025

At our Annual Congregational Meeting in January, we committed ourselves to the "Reconciling in Christ" process. We will unpack what that means as we undertake the process in the weeks and months ahead.

I propose that a big step in understanding it can take place through correctly translating John 20:23 and in understanding its place in the Gospel. John's Gospel gives us a version of New Creation, resonant with that of St. Paul, when we read four weeks ago,

> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor 5:17-19)

That ministry of reconciliation apparently begins with God "not counting their trespasses against them." It begins when we also do not count our sins against each other. And when we figure in that God shows us this new creation in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, we might add that we stop counting our sins against each other *with deadly consequences*. Our counting sins against Jesus had deadly consequences. We need to stop doing that to each other.

In today's Gospel Reading, the Risen Jesus comes bearing the way to "Peace!" Reconciliation. Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit and commissions them to the ministry of reconciliation, with these words,

> "Of whomever you forgive sins, they are forgiven them; whomever you hold fast are held fast." (John 20:23)

Confession I changed the NRSV translation, which reads:

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

Do you see how these are basically the opposite of each other? The first translation implies not counting sins against each other so that we can be held fast together in community. The NRSV translation allows for counting sins against each other. 'Retaining sins' instead of holding fast to each other.

Where does such a translation as the NRSV come from? Suggestion: from our more than 1000 years of allying with nationalistic empire, whose thinking is deeply structured by being clear about who's in and who's out, who's a friend and who's an enemy. And generally with deadly consequences.

Example: the story of the Nicene Creed in 325 AD. For almost the first 300 years of the church, differences in theology were the occasion for deeper and continuing conversation. When Constantine declared Christianity as the imperial religion, one of the first things he did was call a conference of bishops in Nicaea, which churned out a common statement of theology, the Nicene Creed. But Constantine went further with the three bishops who still held dissenting, minority views. He had two of them executed and exiled the third. That's how nationalistic empires do things. The difference of opinions which can occasion fertile conversation becomes the counting of sins against each other with deadly consequences.

The alternate translation of John 20:23 comes from an essay by New Testament scholar Sandra Schneider, who pairs that poignant moment of John 20:23 with John the Baptist's exclamation at the beginning of the Gospel when seeing Jesus: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Notice: "sin" not "sins." Is their especially one sin which Jesus came to take way? Schneiders' proposal is basically that the one sin is the way in which we human beings build community based on scapegoats — like the lamb of God we crucified. In short, as we've been saying, we count our sins against each other with deadly consequences. That's the sin which the lamb of God came to take away!

John 1:29 and 20:23 bracket our holding sins against Jesus with deadly consequences. And straightforward hints like John 16:8, Jesus saying, "When the Holy Spirit comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment."

Let's learn this important lesson together through the "Reconciling in Christ" process in the weeks and months ahead! Jesus continues to breathe his Spirit on us!