

Please, Don't Let Me Go (John 20:19-31)

You know the scene. The whole movie, the bad guy has gotten the best of it. He's hurt the good guy's family, shot his partner, and wreaked mindless havoc on a terrified city. Then, finally, we see the two locked in an epic battle on top of a skyscraper as a getaway helicopter circles. They've knocked each other's guns to the ground and punched each other mercilessly for about five minutes. And just as the bad guy has our hero backed up to the edge of the building, a fall and certain death immanent, miraculously, the positions are switched. The bad guy loses his footing and goes over the edge. But the good guy reaches his well-muscled arm out to grab the villain before he plummets unceremoniously to his death. Our hero strains to hold onto the bad guy with all he has. And the villain says something like, "You don't have the guts." By this time, of course, we think—almost viscerally—"Yes, he does! Drop that jerk!"

And it rarely occurs to us that we've been had. Hollywood has subverted us again—made murderers out of friendly ordinary people. We killed him in our minds, just as sure as if it had been our hands to which he had been clinging. But something about it felt so right, didn't it? Justice is involved. You get what you deserve. What goes around comes around. If you want to dance, you have to pay the piper. The Bible even talks about it: "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered (Lev. 24:19-20).

Of course, the world has worked that way from the beginning. But it's not quite adequate, is it? Intuitively, we know that straight, eye-for-an-eye, retributive justice isn't very effective. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, a society that relies entirely on an eye-for-an-eye justice only winds up producing a lot of blind people.

But sometimes, we rise above the pettiness of the tit-for-tat. In our better moments, we act differently. We teach it to our children and call it *The Golden Rule*: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The Synoptic Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—carry on some variation of this theme. Of course, in the mouth of Jesus, The Golden Rule sounds something like: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

To be honest, that feels like quite an improvement in a civilized society, don’t you think? In our most idealistic moments, we believe it to be at least better than a Hammurabi-like lopping off of body parts.

Still, though, as an ethical system, it does have the drawback of relying entirely on **me** as the reference point—which, frankly, feels like something of a flaw in the system. I mean, what if I don’t love myself very much at all? What if I happen to be

self-destructive? Does the golden rule relieve me of my duty toward another person beyond what I might expect from myself? The golden rule doesn't work for nihilists.

That's a problem, isn't it?

Jesus, seeing that more is needed for the ordering of a new world, comes up with a different standard. No longer do I get to treat people the same way they treat me or even treat them the way **I'd** like to be treated. He raises the ethical bar on us.

According to Jesus, I'm duty-bound now, not to love my neighbor as myself (which is inadequate, given the many ways we fail so often to love ourselves), but to love my neighbor as **Christ** has loved **me**.

There, of course, is the catch.

And why is that?

Well, how did Jesus love us?

Now, you see the giant tree that's fallen across our path on the way to living the way Jesus lived, right?

Take a look at our Gospel this morning. It's only been a few hours since Jesus' remaining followers received the shocking news that his body was missing. From their reaction, we get the sense that news about Jesus having been raised from the dead either hasn't sunk in or has met with a great deal of skepticism from everyone who hadn't gone to the tomb that morning.

As it is, Jesus' followers are all gathered in a house with the doors locked—like they just got done watching Sleep Away Camp Massacre IV. Huddled together, everybody's shooting furtive glances around the room, trying to figure out the next move. Remember, to the Romans, these followers are likely considered accomplices to a failed revolutionary, whom the state has just

executed as a cautionary tale to any enterprising political subversive with ideas of freedom-fighter glory.

That Jesus' followers are on constant watch for the Po-Po doesn't make them faithless; it makes them smart. They know their faces are plastered all over every Post Office in Palestine. If they hadn't gone to ground, Jesus' followers would likely have found themselves staring down at a world that had gone mad from the loft heights of a cross.

It's into this fraught atmosphere that Jesus walks unannounced. He somehow finds his way in through all the locked doors, and the first word out of his mouth is "Peace,"—which is fitting, given that peace is so far down on everybody's list of current emotional states at this point that peace is something they're pretty well convinced they're never going to feel it again.

Then Jesus says something interesting. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

What does that even mean?

Jesus is putting everyone else's forgiveness into the hands of his ***followers?***

That doesn't sound like a good idea, does it? Because, I gotta tell you, I know a lot of Jesus' followers, and I'm not sure I want my flimsy attempts at being human scrutinized like I'm going to receive a score at the moral Olympics.

"Penwell's last attempt looked solid, but the Russian judge only gave him a 9.0. He's going to need more than ***that*** if he's going to last into the final round."

My forgiveness is in someone ***else's*** hands?

I know it's probably just me, but I have difficulty believing that this is what Jesus meant when he started talking about forgiving sins.

A few years back, Sandra Schneiders, president of the Catholic Biblical Association, offered a grammatically different way of reading this part of our text. In Greek, "sins" are only mentioned once: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." So, according to Dr. Schneiders, the second part should read something like, "If you retain them, they are retained."

But that raises another question, doesn't it?

"**What** or **who** is retained?"

Because of the ambiguity inherent in certain Greek cases, the translators have to make a guess. Traditionally, they've assumed that the "**them**" being retained are the "sins." But Schneiders

argues that the passage makes more sense to go with the other option; it's not the sins but the sinner we hold onto.

She writes: "Of whomever (*possessive* genitive plural) you forgive the sins, they (the sins) are forgiven to them; **whomever** (*objective* genitive plural) you hold fast [or embrace], they are held fast [or embraced]."

In other words, when Jesus' followers make a decision about forgiving another's sins, they aren't standing as God's appointed judges. Instead, they're being given the responsibility for hanging onto someone who's in danger of falling.

That's got to be way more comforting to a group of scared disciples afraid that they **themselves** are in danger of falling with no one around to hold **them** fast than giving them the job of going out to judge the rest of the world.

We **already** have a pretty good idea of how that would turn out, don't we—giving one group of religious people the power to judge everyone else's moral lives?

Already, too many of the folks who call themselves Christian are skulking around everyone else's bedrooms, around their doctor's offices, camped outside their bathrooms and locker rooms, trying to catch people they consider sinners and then condemn them, holding fast not to **people** struggling to hold on but to their **sins**.

We don't need **more** amateur Sherlock Holmeses who've been mandated to go out and judge people different from them. **That's** how we end up with folks convinced they know exactly who in a crowded downtown bank shouldn't be allowed to live any longer, how we end up with so many dead Black people in jail cells or lying dead in the street.

Jesus' first visit after Easter Sunday morning was only a brief proof of life hostage video. Not all of Jesus' disciples were even

there. Apparently, they'd sent Thomas out to buy pizza and Twinkies for everyone because he didn't get to see Jesus' appearance. Like most of the rest of us, Thomas is withholding judgment until he sees for himself. He knows how the world works, and he's not giving an inch until he sees the Snopes report either busting or confirming this myth.

It's been a week, and Thomas is dubious about the stories of Jesus' resurrection—so much so, in fact, that Thomas has become part of our cultural lexicon as a man whose only notable quality is ***doubting***. But when Jesus finally shows up to Thomas, it isn't his doubt that Jesus clings to ... it's Thomas himself.

Thomas, along with all of the rest of us sinners, holds out his hand and, despite his doubt, says, "Please, don't let me go."

Jesus reaches out his hand and grabs Thomas on the way down.

Mary Hinkle Shore points out that

as we experience the story of Thomas, we are invited to trust that Jesus will keep showing up, alive, and with a body that holds together the worst that has happened to him and his risen life ... Again and again, he will offer that wounded, living body to his own beloved ones, until finally the whole creation will be held fast in the peace he offers when he makes himself known.

My friend Kevin was instrumental in the cleanup after the flooding in the northern part of our state some years back. One day he was leading a crew in cleaning up one of the local churches ravaged by flooding when a woman came to the back door and said, "Can somebody help me?"

"Sure," my friend said, "what do you need?"

"Well, we live in a second-story apartment over our landlord. And our apartment's fine, but it wiped out everything on the first floor in our **landlord's** apartment. And he came to us and told us that we needed to get out of **our** apartment so he could use it to live

in. He said we needed to have all our stuff out by 5:00 today, or he's going to have it taken to the dump. And we were wondering if you could help us move stuff out. It ain't much, but it's all we got."

"Of course," Kevin said, livid that the landlord would treat struggling people like that. So he took the crew to the house, and the woman was right. The downstairs apartment had been devastated.

When they got upstairs, they found that although no water had reached the apartment, it didn't look a whole lot better than what they'd seen on the first floor. There were papers all around. The furniture had holes in it. They found a half-eaten loaf of bread with mouse droppings on it. About the only object worth anything was the bed. The frame was obviously an antique, but the mattress was old and spotted. There were tears in it.

Kevin said, "We can move the frame, but we don't have room for the mattress. But don't worry; we can get you a new mattress and box springs when we get you moved in."

"We can't take the mattress?"

"No. It's in bad shape anyway, and we don't have room. But don't worry; we'll get you a **new** one."

So they moved the stuff into another dumpy apartment and were on their way back when they pulled up to see the National Guard loading that nasty old mattress on the back of one of their trucks as the woman supervised. Tired and aggravated after days of work, Kevin stopped the truck and stomped out. "Hey, I thought we agreed to leave that mattress here and we'd get you a **new** one. What's going on?"

"Well, preacher," she said, "I got to studying it after we talked. And I know that old mattress doesn't look like much to you, but

it's worked fine for us for years. And I was thinkin' that if you had a brand new mattress and stuff, that you might could give it to my **landlord**—'cause he ain't got anything now. Everything he had was wiped out."

And, knowing the landlord's sins, his callous selfishness, we said, "Drop that jerk! Let him go. He deserves it."

But she didn't listen to us. She held on to him anyway.

I don't know about you, but as someone who regularly feels like he might plummet to the bottom because of his faults and inadequacies, the thought of Jesus holding out his hand brings me unspeakable peace.

How did Jesus love us?

That's a tough one. I mean, we just observed Good Friday a little over a week ago. But I heard about a lady in Owenton, Kentucky, who knows the answer. Maybe we ought to ask her.

-Amen.