

John 20:19-31

A number of years ago a book made its way through Lutheran circles bearing the title, "Every Christian a Minister." It seems we have gone even further as of late, for the attitude today is: Everyone His Own Minister. We're back in the days of the Judges of Israel when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." And far be it from anyone to tell us otherwise! Our attitude today is one of "Don't preach to me; I'll decide if what I'm doing is right or wrong!" But even worse is the thinking, "I don't need anyone to stand in the place of God for me; if I want forgiveness, I'll just go to Him myself."

The church in the days after Easter had a far different attitude from that. Peter, James, John, and all the rest of the disciples did not carry around a chip on their shoulders. They did not have a proud attitude. They were not full of themselves. Rather, they were full of fear. Even more than fear of the Jews, they were afraid of God, for they had denied, betrayed, and forsaken Him. It was the Garden of Eden all over again—not the beauty and holiness of it, but the hiding from God in fear and trepidation. Jesus' disciples had locked themselves in. They were scared, weak, full of doubts—they were pitiful. And if you care to accept it...so are we.

We aren't as bold as we think we are. When faced with our own shortcomings we quickly defend ourselves and blame others for our own faults. We're afraid to own up to our sinful wretchedness. We're weak. We don't keep our vows to God; we break our promises to each other. Like that pitiful group on Easter evening, we lock ourselves in and we shut God's Word out. We don't want to hear what He has to say to us. We know we're bad. We know that, we too, have denied, betrayed, and forsaken Him.

That was the church back then, and that is the church today. If we think the church is a group of bold, confident confessors of God's truth, then we're deluding ourselves. The church is sinful men and women, boys and girls like you and me who constantly struggle to do what is right; who fall from grace day after day; who are weak and full of doubts; and who lock ourselves in because of our fears and failures.

What's surprising about our Gospel reading for today is not that this picture describes Jesus' disciples, but that Jesus desired to come to this pitiful, frightened group. If you're going to lead an army into battle, you're going to choose the most confident, fearless soldiers you can find—not a group of weak and whimpering men. But it's the latter group that Jesus chooses. As God did in the Garden of Eden, so Jesus does on Easter evening—He finds these frightened, hiding sinners; He comes to them; and He gives them His word of peace and forgiveness.

That same word He gives to you today. Jesus does not care what you have done to hurt Him. It matters not how often you have forsaken Him. He is here today in His Word and Sacraments to forgive you. The same word He gave on Easter evening He gives to you now, "Peace be with you." Your God is at peace with you—not because you haven't sinned against Him, but because Jesus carried your sins to the cross and He died for you.

After Jesus gave His disciples the word of peace He showed them His hands and His side. You know what they saw. They saw the marks of the nails and the spear. The same Jesus who was crucified has risen, and that is why our God is at peace with us. When the

seminary students attend daily chapel services in Fort Wayne, Indiana, there is someone who stands next to the pulpit close to where the deaf students sit. He signs the sermon with his hands for these students. The sign for Jesus is to touch the palms of his hands with his fingers. Jesus is still known today as the “Crucified One.” Yes, He is risen, but those marks are there for you. He was “pierced for your transgressions.” He was “crushed for your offenses.”

We tend to jump all over Thomas for his doubting words, “Unless I see the nail marks in His hands...I will not believe.” But Thomas was absolutely right! Not for doubting the eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ, but for insisting that the only Jesus he would ever believe in is the one who was nailed to a cross. We need to be like Thomas in this. Jesus today does not show us the nail marks in His hands, but He does give us a visible sign of His death for us—the Lord’s Supper. This meal proclaims His death. Whenever we come forward to eat of His body and blood for us, we are putting our fingers in the nail marks in His hands and we are putting our hand into His side.

Here Christ comes to us just as He came to Thomas. And this Christ for us is the only Christ we believe in. Don’t look for Jesus in your heart or in your head. The crucified and risen Christ is He who comes to you and for you in Water, Word, Bread, and Wine. And there is no other Jesus.

This Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, after appearing to His disciples on Easter evening, did something that we might think a little odd. It says, “He breathed on them.” But think of this...for one thing, only the living can breathe. Jesus showed Himself to be the Living One by breathing on His disciples. But He didn’t just breathe on them—He breathed into them. As God breathed life into Adam in the Garden, so Jesus breathes new life into His disciples. This is not just air coming out of His mouth. Jesus breathes His Holy Spirit on them. He breathes faith, forgiveness, and hope into them.

And because Jesus lives and is here for you, whenever you gather to hear His Word He also breathes on you. God does not hold His breath waiting for you to obey Him. When His Word is preached He breathes out upon you, forgiving you for disobeying Him, and giving you His strength and His life. As the lifeguard said to the woman he had just saved from drowning by blowing into her mouth, “Ma’am, my life is now in you,” so also God’s life is in each one of you.

Friend, you are filled with the life of Christ. In Holy Baptism He resurrected you bringing you from death to life. And even though you and I keep forsaking Him day after day, He delights in breathing His life into you every time you hear His Word of Life.

Your life, therefore, is not your own. It is Christ who lives His life in you and through you. And Christ is the Crucified One who is the very Word of peace and forgiveness. This means that wherever you go, you are able to breathe upon others the same word of forgiveness Jesus gives to you. That’s just what He told His disciples on Easter. Through them, the church would be about the work of forgiving sins. And that’s why your pastor stands here before you, so that as often as you come here confessing your sins, Jesus through the words proclaimed by your pastor, forgives you for every wrong you have done. You might say, therefore, that when you come here to church—you inhale, and when you

go out among family and friends—you exhale. The same breath of forgiveness Jesus gives you here is what you breathe to those who sin against you.

Today we are happy to have with us the Confirmation Class of 1957. I think the rest of us can look at these class members and from them, learn better how to breathe. For fifty plus years they have been, by the grace of God, inhaling and exhaling Christ's breath of forgiveness and peace. And I think they would agree with me that the older you get, the more aware you become of how sinful you are and how much you depend on God's rich grace and mercy in Christ.

As you were told the day you were confirmed, so I repeat again today...keep breathing the breath of Christ. Stay in His Word and Sacraments. "Be faithful unto death and He will give you the crown of life." But remember always, no matter how pitiful we are; no matter how weak and sinful and full of doubts—the good news for you is that Jesus comes to you (to all of you) in His Living Word, and He forgives you. And that is the sweet breath of air in which we live. Amen.