

ASCENSION SUNDAY – B
“Creating Space for the Spirit”

A woman was seeing a counsellor for depression. He asked her to tell her about how she lived her day, for example, in the morning did she wake up grumpy? She replied tartly, “No, I let him sleep in.”

Do you remember being taught in science, that no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time?

Forgiveness creates space for the Spirit of the Risen Jesus in your life.

This gospel, the last episode of Jesus’ physical presence here on earth, captures the essence of what it means to believe in Jesus and follow him. Those who believe in him are to spread his message, baptise people into his Body the Church, and love one another. Those who truly believe and live this way will experience his presence and his power working in their lives. The signs of that are listed as picking up snakes, drinking deadly poison, speaking in tongues, and laying hands on the sick who will recover.

What are we to make of these signs, knowing that in the Southern States some members of religious sects who took these words literally and incorporated handling snakes into their enthusiastic services, died from snake bites?

Someone who has lived this gospel can teach us a lot. Viola had been estranged from her abusive ex-partner for years, for her own safety. One day he severely verbally abused her over the phone. Formerly, such an incident would have thrown her into total confusion. Her recent involvement with the church, however, helped her respond in a different manner. She had taken the Christopher Leadership Course, a Lay Formation program called “Builders of the New Earth, and had attended a Cursillo, and had learned to “communicate with love” based on the teaching of Jesus in Mt 18:15 (“If your brother wrongs you, go to him alone *and tell him how you feel*”) and Mt 5:44 (“Love your enemies”).

Relying on these teachings, she decided not to react and act out of anger. Instead, she chose to take positive action. She wrote a letter to her ex-partner describing what he had said, and expressing her feelings of hurt and anger in a positive manner, with love. Then she went with her daughter to deliver the letter to him at a meeting he was attending.

His first reaction was to get angry. She quickly told him that there was nothing to get angry about, and asked him to read it again. He did so and his reaction upon reading the letter a second time was to stand there, open mouthed and speechless, then he said simply “Okay” and returned to the meeting. Her daughter said with awe in her voice, “Mom.” She had never seen her mother relate to her dad in this way before.

Returning home, Viola was filled with joy. Sorting out her emotions afterwards with the help of her pastor, she realized what she had done it - she had loved her enemy, had communicated with love, had actually forgiven him in the process and was free from anger and resentment.

With excitement, he pointed out that she was experiencing the signs that Jesus told the disciples would accompany them: “they will speak a new language, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison.” (Mk 16:17-18)

In writing that letter, she had picked up a deadly snake and it never hurt her. In delivering the letter to her ex-partner, she drank deadly poison and it had not harmed her. In expressing her feelings of hurt with love, she had used the language of love so effectively that her daughter marveled at her. Her daughter had never seen her relate to her dad that way – before, it was always a fight. This truly was a new language, and a new way of life that her mother was living. Viola was truly a disciple who was experiencing the reign of God and the power of the resurrection in her life.

The new life of Easter is all about forgiveness. Ascension is all about realizing the life of Easter in our lives, through forgiveness. Forgiveness is all about letting go of anger, resentment, the compulsion to be right, and the need to take revenge. When we choose to forgive, rather than to fight or flee, we are being Easter people. To share our feelings of hurt to those who hurt us with love, is to break the cycle of violence, to open new possibilities for reconciliation, and to free ourselves to live and love in a new way. Learning to forgive creates a space for the Spirit of the Risen Jesus to enter our hearts.

Another new language that we must learn to speak, especially as parents, is the language of blessing. The opposite of blessing is to curse. To put others down, to call them names, to belittle them, is to curse them. But cursing is not using bad language. The real nature of cursing is to steal love and affirmation from people, to deprive them of the love they need from others.

To bless (“benedicere”) means to speak well of someone. Parents need to bless their children who hunger for that blessing. Jesus was able to give his life freely for us because he had experienced the Father’s blessing. Three times in the scriptures, the Father blesses Jesus: at his baptism in the Jordan and at the transfiguration, the Father blesses Jesus with the words, “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!” Powerful words of blessing that filled Jesus with the courage and confidence he needed to take up the cross and give his life for us.

It is the same with us. Fathers need to bless their sons (instead of competing with them), and mothers need to bless their daughters (instead of being threatened by them). A blessing is even more powerful when it comes from someone of the same gender, because the tendency to compete is stronger within the same gender.

Imagine an older priest who is able to say to a younger priest, “I am glad that you are in our diocese. You will be loved by the people. You will take away all my popularity, but you will give much to the people. I wish you well and will support you any way that I can.” That younger priest will thrive in ministry, and will, in his turn when he gets older, be able to pass on that blessing to someone else.

There is more to the ascension – Jesus has risen in his humanity, and taken our humanity with him. We are already there, with him, as part of his body, the Church. It is up to us to believe that, and to live out who we are – his Body here on earth, by living the new life he gave us – a life of forgiveness and freedom from anger and resentment.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is God blessing us with his love shown us through his Son. We are sent out to bless others, by giving our lives for them, and living the mystery of Ascension in our lives.

So remember, love and resentment cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Forgiveness creates a space for the Spirit of the Risen Jesus in our lives.

ASCENSION SUNDAY – B – (Preached Version)
“Building God’s Kingdom Through a Spirit of Forgiveness”

JOKE: Wake Up Grumpy

HH: Do you see yourself as helping to build kingdom of God?

PT: Pray for the power to forgive; Spirit of forgiveness

CONTEXT:

- KC anniversary and degrees
- Ascension Sunday: promise of power; kingdom; witness
- Repeat message:

POWER: names of the Spirit, and Exousia

ASCENSION:

- divinity and humanity meet; kingdom here on earth; motto
- Cross all about forgiveness; power of forgiveness does it best
- letting go of resentment, addictions, open to the Spirit

STORY OF VIOLA AND THE GOSPEL

LANGUAGE OF BLESSING:

MINISTRIES:

- KC’s charity, unity and fraternity
- Variety of ministries of R 2
- Practicing Catholics

EUCCHARIST: a blessing and mandate to bless, build the kingdom

SO: Pray for the power to forgive, Spirit of forgiveness,
to build up the kingdom of God here on earth