

Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2021

“Pointing Fingers” (Acts 3:12-9, 1 John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36-48)

When I first started in ministry almost 25 years ago, I was crafting my sermon manuscripts on a portable typewriter that I had used throughout my seminary years. It was always a long and laborious process, especially if you were continually hitting the wrong keys and having to use the backspace key to correct. It was worse yet if the correction tape was gone and *White Out* was the only option.

Fortunately, a few months after my arrival at St. James (my first call), the congregation purchased two computers: one for the secretary’s office and one for mine. That’s when I was introduced to Microsoft Word. Although I had to educate myself in its use, it was like a breath of heaven. I was cranking out documents like crazy; and when I did mess up or want to change the sentence structure, the backspace key was my best friend.

But then one day it happened. I was typing away when my fingers accidentally hit a series of keystrokes that wiped out my entire document. It just disappeared, leaving me with a blank screen. Unhappy with Microsoft Word for the first time, I had to completely reconstruct the document. When I bemoaned to someone what I had done, she said, *You should have just hit the UNDO button. When you mess up or do something you don’t want to, just hit UNDO and it will bring it back like it was. Really?*

I had seen that little arrow in the top left hand corner of my screen, but had no idea what it was for. So the next time it happened – and it did – I tried this new function. I was in love with Word again! I learned from that experience that when it appears you have messed up royally or that all is lost, it can be undone. That’s the message in Peter’s sermon which is recoded in our first lesson for today from the book of Acts.

Peter and John had just healed a crippled beggar. People looked at them as if they were great and wonderful healers. But Peter didn’t take the credit for this miracle because he knew it was through the power of Jesus that this man was healed. And he didn’t hesitate to give Christ the glory. Like an experienced fighter, Peter came out of the corner swinging. He made sure the worshippers at the Temple that day got the point of his message. God had sent someone to heal and to save, but he had been crucified.

Pointing the finger at them, his fellow Jews, Peter’s words were like pounding a stake into their hearts with a sledge hammer. *But YOU handed him over to be killed! BAM! YOU disowned him before Pilate! BAM! YOU disowned the holy and righteous One! BAM! YOU killed the Author of Life! BAM!* Peter got their attention all right, and it hurt. He laid down the law and pointed the finger at their guilt and complicity in Jesus’ death.

But then came the gospel; *Yes, you killed the Son of God, but God raised him from the dead.* God had pressed the divine UNDO button and had undone what they had done. It was in the name of the risen, living Christ that this crippled man was healed.

Peter is pointing fingers at us this morning, as well. Every time we sidestep an opportunity to witness for Christ, we, too, are rejecting him. Every time we use his name in vain, we, too, are disowning him. Every time we display hatred toward another person, we drive the nails a little deeper. We stand as guilty as those who stood before Peter; guilty of crucifying the very One who came to save us.

And we need to feel guilty. Otherwise, we cannot truly appreciate the good news of the resurrection. We can't truly comprehend what it means for us, much like we can't appreciate good health until we experience a terrible illness (or Microsoft Word until we've typed on a portable typewriter). We have to feel condemned before we can experience the liberating power of the gospel; before we experience the fullness of life that God intended for us from the very beginning. So the finger is pointed at us.

But then Peter points the finger at God, the One who raised Jesus from the dead, the One who can UNDO our sins and raise us, as well.

The second lesson from 1 John tells us the good news of this loving and gracious God. *See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.* John tells us that we have an identity. We are children of God, adopted into the family of God for life. So now the finger points to the Baptismal Font; for it is in the waters of that holy bath that our identity is sealed.

I wish this scripture was part of last Sunday's lectionary text when little Henry came to these holy waters, but I'll use his baptism as an example. Although born in sin, God washed away his sin and undid what our fallen humanity has done. In those waters, Henry was joined to the death and resurrection of Christ. He was claimed for life as a child of God; and that's what he will be – for life! Like all of us who have been baptized, he will never have to question God's love for him; he will never have to doubt Christ's presence and activity in his life. These gifts will remain with him throughout eternity.

God's gracious love – the greatest of all gifts – is given to us even when we don't deserve it. And if any of us think we *do* deserve it, let me assure you that we are absolutely, 100% guilty, deserving nothing but punishment and death. Yet God's love is greater than our guilt. And God's love comes to us without our asking, just as Henry came to the font asking nothing. Yet in those waters, he received the tremendous, life-long gift of God's grace.

But the Christian story doesn't end here with us doing all the receiving. The finger points in another direction – away from us and out into the world.

Our gospel lesson for today is Luke's version of what we heard last week from John's gospel. The disciples were gathered together in the upper room wondering if the rumors that had spread about Jesus' resurrection had any merit or not. To their surprise, Jesus stood among them. *Peace be with you.* They were terrified, thinking that he was a ghost. But Jesus quickly put their minds at ease. *Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones.* And then to prove he was not a ghost, but a living, breathing human, he asked for something to eat. They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he ate it in their presence.

In that act, Jesus was establishing his identity; and he went on to explain to them how he was the fulfillment of the promises God had made through the prophets and the psalms. Through his death on the cross, he had redeemed them from their sins. And through his resurrection, he had given them the promise of eternal life. He *was* the Messiah who had come to save them.

But then he pointed his finger beyond that room and out into the larger world. *Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations... You are witnesses of these events, so go and tell.*

We, too, are witnesses of God's love for all people through Christ. Therefore, we can't simply receive the gifts of God's grace through baptism and then do nothing with them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit received at baptism, we are empowered to go into the world as disciples. There we point our fingers at Jesus the Christ, and proclaim that through his death and resurrection, God is undoing what sin, death and the devil have done in the world.

My dear children of God, our identity is set forever; we are part of God's family. May we, in grateful appreciation, always point to Christ, the one who made our salvation possible. Thanks be to God!