

The Letters in our Hearts: John 20:19-31

Preached by The Rev. Anne Lemay, Dn, St. Luke's Gladstone, April 23, 2017

The Boy Who Prayed with the Alphabet – a traditional Jewish tale from *The Hungry Clothes and Other Jewish Folktales*.

Once there was a poor, ignorant boy who took care of the sheep. The only thing he had ever learned was the *aleph-bet*. All day long, he would sing the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The sheep enjoyed hearing their shepherd's song, for he had a sweet voice.

Sometimes the boy and his father would go to the synagogue on Shabbat. They would sit in the back, where the unlearned men sat. The young boy could not read the prayers. He could not sing the songs. He sat there just listening and feeling happy to know that he was part of the Jewish people. That much his father had taught him, for the father himself did not know many of the prayers.

The boy's mother had taught her son to recite the *aleph-bet*. She had learned the alphabet from her own mother. The boy loved to repeat the letters over and over. He loved the sound of each one.

One Shabbat, the boy went to the synagogue with his father. He listened to the cantor chant the beautiful prayers to God. He listened to the rabbi speak such wonderful-sounding words. He looked around at all the men in their prayer shawls praying and speaking directly to God. This boy, too, wanted to express his feelings of love for God.

Suddenly, the young boy began to recite the *aleph-bet*. At first, he spoke softly, but then his voice became louder and louder.

His father stopped him. "Be quiet!" he commanded in a loud whisper. "You don't know how to read the prayers. Stop talking nonsense. Show respect! You're in the synagogue."

The boy sat quietly, but after a while he began again. Again, the father stopped him. This time he put a hand on the boy's mouth and said, "The rabbi will hear you and throw us out for what you are doing. Sit without making a sound or I'll take you home."

So the boy sat quietly. But how long could he sit there when all around him he saw and felt the holiness of the day? All of a sudden the boy started to recite the alphabet again, even louder than before. Then, faster than his father could catch him, he jumped up from his seat and ran to the *bimah* (pronounced **bee-mah**), the podium where the prayers were read.

"Ruler of the Universe, I know I am only a child. I want so much to sing the beautiful prayers to you but I don't know them. All I know is the *aleph-bet*. Please, dear God, take these letters of the alphabet and rearrange them to form the words that mean what I want to say to you and what is in my heart."

When the father, the rabbi, and the congregation heard the boy's words, tears formed in their eyes, and they all joined him in reciting, "*Aleph, bet, **daled**, **gimmel**, hey ...*"

I found that story because of a work of art.

My home parish, St. Luke's in Metuchen, has a unique ministry: They have converted two classrooms in the education building into an art gallery that holds two exhibits each year. They call the art gallery The Nails in the Wall, and send out calls twice each year to artists around the world to submit works that fit the theme for each show. The current exhibit is called **Beautiful & Powerful Statements: The Arts of Calligraphy and Repurposed Materials**, and it includes some fascinating pieces. Each one reflects the uniqueness of its artist, and each one has a spiritual context that reveals just one tiny piece of the complex nature of God.

A favorite of many of us who work in the gallery is an assemblage by Saralee Howard, an artist from Michigan, entitled, **I Will Give Him the Letters** and it is based on the story I just told you, a story that speaks to us *all* in the way that only stories can.

Like the prayer of the boy in the story, this work of art is not typical: The background is not made with canvas or paper: It's an old, discarded 19th century printer's drawer – you've seen them – the flat wooden drawers with little spaces that hold the letters of the alphabet that are used to form words on a printing press. In Saralee Howard's piece, many of the little spaces are empty, while in others wooden type blocks with Hebrew letters on them are crammed in. The artist writes that many subtle and not so subtle reminders of prayer and of artistic creation are embedded in this assemblage: The Hebrew word for "sin" is enclosed within an orange wood circle; the Hebrew word for "flesh" is found on tiny feet of clay in the lower right corner of the piece. The artist used discarded elements in this work: imperfect brushes - paintbrushes that were used too well and not cleaned properly - stand as colorful witnesses to creative works past, reminding us, along with the paint-and-ink-stained block letters, that God takes us with all of our imperfections and uses us to serve others in creating the Kingdom of Heaven.

And so we come to the Gospel reading for today, a story we've heard many times before: The story of how Jesus appeared to the disciples after the Resurrection.

They are gathered together on the evening of that Third Day, the day of the Resurrection, hiding in the same room where they had their farewell meal with Jesus just a few days ago. The doors are locked, for they are afraid after witnessing the horrific events of Thursday night and Friday, that the Jewish authorities will seek *them* out next and kill them also. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Jesus was the Messiah who would restore God's kingdom on earth, and instead he suffered a horrific death, and the disciples feel abandoned and afraid.

Suddenly, Jesus is there with them, despite the locked doors, and greets them: Peace be with you. This was a traditional greeting at that time. And yet ... didn't Jesus say, earlier in John's gospel, that he would give the disciples his peace? "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives ... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

And after this greeting, Jesus showed the disciples his hands and his side, and they recognized him and rejoiced. And then he breathes on them, just as God breathed on the first human at the creation of the world, and so, having been born again in the waters of baptism with Jesus during his ministry, they are now born again of the spirit, and Jesus tells them to go out into the world and continue his ministry: If they forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven, and if they retain those sins, they are retained.

The *New Interpreters' Bible*, which is an extensive multi-volume commentary on the scriptures, notes that this is a very complex verse to interpret: If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven ... The scholars who put together the *New Interpreters' Bible* say that it is critical that this verse be heard in the context of John's entire gospel and not through the lens of the Reformation, and here is why: In John, sin is a theological failing not a moral or behavioral transgression. Think about that: To have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. Forgiving sins does not involve forgiving moral transgressions – it involves bearing witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus.

Well, that changes things, doesn't it?

So often, we in the 21st century still see sin as a transgression, as breaking the rules, as a measure of who's in and who's out in God's book of judgment.

So if forgiving sins involves bearing witness to the identity of God as revealed in Jesus, then perhaps we need to take another look at how we see Jesus and how we see God.

The identity of God in the Old Testament is one of a Judge who tests and punishes, even though he never entirely gives up on his people and he always takes them back again. But if you were to ask your friends and acquaintances in the world who God is, many, if not most, would speak of this judgmental God. Many who reject God and religion do so because this image doesn't fit with their view of life and love in the 21st century.

Yet the identity of God as revealed in Jesus is always – always, always, always - one of Love and Loving Forgiveness. Read the New Testament again with this image in mind, and you will see.

This is the work that Jesus empowers the disciples to do when he breathes on them that night in the upper room: To prove the world wrong about sin; to tell the world about a Loving God who says, about sin and sinners, "Just love them. I'll sort them out later."

Doesn't that change everything? Why are we still stuck on the idea of which rules are right and which ones are wrong? Just love them. God will sort it out later.

We should also understand that Jesus' words are addressed to the entire faith community: The reading doesn't say that only the twelve – well, eleven without Judas – were in that upper room. It says "the disciples." That's everyone, not just the special ones. That means that the forgiveness of sins is the work of the entire community of believers. All of us.

Those of us who were raised as Roman Catholics may remember going to the little wooden confessional booth to recite your sins to the priest, who would forgive us in God's name. The idea of forgiveness as being the work of the entire community of believers to witness to God's Love in the world is so radically different. We are really called by Christ to forgive one another.

Put this in the context of the 1st century world, a world where people lived with blame and payback – an eye for an eye. That was justice, that was right, and we still live with that philosophy to this day. And consider instead the idea of forgiveness as forgiving one another and even forgiving ourselves. How does that change the way we live? The way we treat others? The way we handle problems and disagreements? The way we pray?

Who is this Jesus who leads with the heart instead of the mind, who lives by the law of Loving Forgiveness rather than by the logic of the law? Jesus challenged the rules by accepting all, loving all, giving of himself over and over again: to the Samaritan woman at the well, to the hungry crowds who followed him up the mountainside and by the sea, to the sick, the poor, the greedy tax collectors. Even to those who arrested him, he gave silence rather than defensiveness and argument.

"Jesus lives not because he can walk through locked doors and show his wounds to frightened disciples but because he breathes new life into those disciples and commissions them to continue his work,*" and because we have been baptized into this community of faith, we are commissioned to continue his work as well.

So how do we do this? First, we can pray. Pray continuously as you go about your daily lives. It doesn't even have to be a prayer with words: Just recite the letters and God will form the words, form them in your hearts.

Pay attention as you go about the work God has given you to do. Try to see everything in your day through God's eyes, remembering that NO ONE is outside God's love, no one is beyond God's grace. God's loving forgiveness is a gift available to all.

The Rev. Becca Stevens is an Episcopal priest in Tennessee, and the founder of Thistle Farms, a place where women who have been abused and experienced the darkest side of life are able to find respect and dignity and salvation. Becca Stevens takes in these broken women and brings them to a healing place where they see and learn firsthand about God's loving forgiveness.

When she spoke at our recent diocesan convention, Becca Stevens said, "If you want it to grow, you've got to give it away."

So it follows that if we want to bring the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ out into the world, we've got to give it away. If we want our hearts to grow in openness and love and acceptance, we've got to give first.

Jesus has conquered death, and commissioned us, and it is no longer enough to simply come to church and worship. We are called to bring the church out into the world, into our daily lives, into our workplaces and neighborhoods and homes, not by proselytizing and trying to convince people logically to follow Jesus, but by loving. Just by loving.

We've got to give God's love away. We've got to give of ourselves and our time and talents, and there are so many opportunities for that. Talk to Jane Knight about what you can do for the soup kitchen, and try to make time to visit it in person at least once. It will change your perspective.

Talk to Roxanne Hayes or Diann Fischer about how you can help the people in Guatemala. It's wonderful that 29 people are going, but what about the rest of us? We don't have to go overseas to help – we can work on the townwide garage sale this coming Saturday, which helps not only the people in Guatemala but the people in our community who are not as well off as we are. Come and work and see for yourselves, and see the joy and love in the children and their families as they shop here for things they can't afford at the shopping malls.

Talk to Alix Weitz or to me about Matheny, and we will tell you about the joy on the faces of the residents who can't form the letters *or* the words when we sing their favorite hymns because of their disabilities, but we see firsthand how God takes those smiles and sounds and forms the words *for* them.

If you aren't doing God's work beyond this community of St. Luke's, if you aren't going out of your comfort zone to bring God's Love into the world, then you're missing out on something. We don't have to be good at it. We don't have to be good at prayer. We don't even have to be good at love. All we have to do is show up and recite the letters, and God will form the words in our hearts, and I promise you, the experience will change you forever. *Amen.*

*quote is from *The New Interpreters' Bible*