

April 12, 2026
John 20:19-23

Easter 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A Double Portion of Peace”

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Good and Plenty Restaurant has been an institution for many generations in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, offering traditional Amish and Mennonite food to patrons who often arrive by the busload. It is similar in many ways to Anna Mae’s in Millbank; one of the differences is that the food is served family style at long communal tables, with strangers often sharing meals together. My university housemate Tom and I experienced Good and Plenty one Saturday after attending a seminar at Franklin and Marshall University in Lancaster, a school that was both a companion school and bitter rival of Ursinus. While our university was known for its academics and beautiful campus, no one would rave about the food, which was very institutional and mass-produced; so, having the opportunity to experience the delicious food at Good and Plenty was something we could not pass up. After waiting in line along with the other patrons, we were seated at a large communal table – and then the food began arriving. It was like nothing we had ever seen before: not only were there endless bowls and dishes of meats, potatoes, vegetables, bread, and other wonderful offerings, but when we took our first bites it was like we had been transported to paradise. The food was so incredibly delicious that we could not stop eating, which was not a problem since the food kept being passed around. At the moment when it seemed like the plates would be empty, a waitress came along and asked, “*who wants seconds?*” It was a question that got an immediate response from the entire table in unison: “*We do!*” In a matter of moments, a double portion of that delicious food arrived, and we ate until we could barely get up from that table in which we enjoyed a wonderful feast with people who were at first strangers but soon became like family.

Receiving a double portion of this wonderful food reminded me of moments when I had received a similar blessing. It often happened at family dinners where that same question was asked and when we received a double portion of delicious food. It happened at childhood birthday parties where we were asked if we would like seconds on cake and ice cream, an offer none of us refused. There are also double portions of blessings that do not involve food; it may be the offer to stay an extra week at a cottage or resort, or the extended visit of a friend or loved one, or

something as simple as a “2 for 1” offer at the local market. A double portion offers us more of something we enjoy, something that can be a benefit to us, something that promises to bless us in ways beyond our imagining.

The disciples who were gathered in fear on the Sunday following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus were not expecting any blessings, much less a double portion of good news. The Fourth Gospel reports that “*when it was evening on that day, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews*” (John 20:19). Those who are cowering behind closed doors are identified as “disciples” (*mathetai*), a large group that would have included the core group of Jesus’ disciples along with other followers; “*the gathering of disciples represents the faith community in general, not only the apostolic leadership*” (Gail O’Day). The disciples are gathered in the evening darkness which signifies “*the absence of Christ the light and their own hopelessness*” (Francis Martin and William Wright). The disciples are hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities who pushed for Jesus’ execution, fearing that they will soon meet the same fate. But the locked doors cannot keep the risen Lord away from them, for “*Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’*” Jesus had assured his disciples in the Farewell Discourse that “*I will come back to you*” (14:28) and “*you will see me*” (16:16). Jesus now fulfills that promise as he offers them the blessing of peace, which is a conventional greeting (“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” – 1 Corinthians 1:3) to which a new function is added: with these words, Jesus fulfills another of his promises from the Farewell Discourse, the gift of his peace:

- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” – 14:27.

This peace is given to the community who will experience the world’s hatred and persecution (“*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you*” – 15:18). The gift of this peace to the disciples who have locked themselves away is a reminder that they need not face the religious authorities anxiously but can do so with the peace of Jesus, the peace of God “*which surpasses all understanding [and] will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:7).

After Jesus greets the disciples with the blessing of his peace, “*he showed them his hands and his side*” (20:20). Jesus’ displaying his body to them underscores the continuity between the earthly and risen Jesus; the presence of the wounds on the risen Jesus’ body indicates that the body resurrected to glory is the same body that

died on the Cross (*“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”* – Luke 24:39). The disciples were in a state of grief, hopelessness and fear, but now they *“rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”* The disciples’ joy, like the end of Mary Magdalene’s weeping (*“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).”* – 20:16) is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that their pain will turn to joy when they see him again:

- *“Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy ... So, you are in pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”* – 16:20-22.

After showing them the wounds of his crucifixion, Jesus offers his disciples a double portion of the gift of his peace: *“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. AS the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* (20:21). This repeated greeting is not a mere duplication of Jesus’ previous blessing of peace; the disciples can receive Jesus’ words as the gift of his peace and not simply as a greeting only after they recognize that the person who speaks to them is “the Lord.” Jesus’ words are a direct echo of his prayer in his High Priestly Prayer that *“as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”* (17:18). The Father’s sending of Jesus is an analogue for Jesus’ sending of the community (*“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* – 3:17). *“Jesus thus commissions the faith community to continue the work God sent him to do.”* (O’Day).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples as witnesses comes with the instruction that *“I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”* (Luke 24:49), a promise that is fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost when the disciple community is *“filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability”* (Acts 2:4). As Jesus appears to his disciples in the Fourth Gospel, this divine blessing is bestowed on them when *“he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”* (20:22). Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is linked to his words in the previous verse, so that the gift of the Holy Spirit is presented as that which empowers the community to continue Jesus’ work. The Holy Spirit was promised after Jesus’ glorification (*“Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified”* – 7:39), and here that moment has arrived. John’s report that Jesus “breathed” on them (*emphysao*) occurs only here in the New Testament, and its usage clearly

evokes the description of God's breathing the breath of life into the first human in the creation story in Genesis (*"then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."* – Genesis 2:7); it also recalls the description of the breath of life in the book of the prophet Ezekiel:

- "Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon those slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." – Ezekiel 37:9-10.

Jesus' breathing the Holy Spirit on his disciples thus is described as a new, second creation. Those who believe in Jesus receive new life as children of God, and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains new life. The Spirit's presence signifies God's presence and guidance; *"in Jesus' absence, the Spirit will be crucial for guidance, remembrance, and empowerment."* (Yung Suk Kim).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is followed by Jesus commissioning the disciples to continue his work in the power of the Spirit: *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (20:23). Jesus' words are addressed to the entire faith community, not only to its apostolic leaders; *"forgiveness of sins is the work of the entire community"* (O'Day). The forgiveness of sins must be understood as the Spirit-empowered mission of continuing Jesus' work in the world. In the Gospel of John, sin is seen as a theological failing, not a moral or behavioral transgression; to have sin is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. *"Jesus brings people to judgment by his revealing work and presence in the world."* Jesus commissions the community to continue the work of making God in Jesus known in the world and thereby to bring the world to a moment of decision and judgment regarding sin. When the believing community receives the Spirit, they are empowered to carry out the work of the Paraclete that Jesus had promised to them so that they may continue the work that God sent Jesus to do:

- "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned." – 16:7:11.

Jesus' gift of the Spirit and his commissioning his disciples to continue his work of forgiveness echoes themes in other teachings of Jesus that emphasize the importance of forgiveness in the life of the faith community, following God's example in Jesus. Forgiveness does not mean condoning evil or injustice; it involves offering grace and mercy, with genuine repentance and justice from those who have wronged others. Mutual forgiveness rests on the foundation of God's love and forgiveness, which believers experience first; *"humans love and forgive because they are loved by God and understand their worth through divine love ... it is an act of offering understanding and grace, not dismissing wrongdoing."* (Kim). The disciples' commissioning to continue Jesus' ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is rooted in the petition in his Lord's prayer that we ask God to *"forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us"* (Matthew 6:12). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches the importance of understanding forgiveness in being rooted in God's gracious love for humanity and our need to be a community that offers that same forgiveness to others in response to the commission of our Risen Lord Jesus Christ:

- "We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny their petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us."

As the disciple community receives a double portion of peace from their risen Lord, so are they called to be as generous in forgiving others and becoming a community of reconciliation. Jesus' command comes with a warning of what happens when they are not willing to be as generous in forgiving others as Jesus has forgiven them: *"if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* This does not mean that we are the ones who decide who is and who is not to receive forgiveness; it is a warning on what happens when we become a community of *ungrace* that refuses to be as generous as Jesus is with his offerings of grace and peace. It means that we need to be the channels through which the love, forgiveness, and reconciliation that are available to all through Christ's death and resurrection flow through us so that we might be the vessels through which all may come to faith in the one who died and rose again so that we might die to sin and rise to everlasting life:

- "By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world; by revealing God to the world, the church makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love. It is

in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that sins are forgiven or retained. The faith community's mission, therefore, is to be the arbiter of right or wrong, but to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus." – O'Day.

The meal that my friend and I enjoyed at Good and Plenty is one that I will always remember not only for the amazing quality of the food but for the generosity with which it was offered. The name of the restaurant says it all: it was both good and plenteous, and blessed us with a meal that not only fed our bodies but created a community out of people who arrived at that table as strangers but left as friends. The grace of God that is ours in Jesus Christ is that great goodness that we celebrate at Easter, and it is a blessing that is plenteous as we receive Christ' double portion of peace in today's Gospel. It is a grace that creates a community out of diverse people when we are called to the table of the Lord to receive the bounty of God's love in the feast of the Lord's Supper. It is a gift that we have received and have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to share with others so that we might become instruments of God's grace and conduits through which the grace and peace of God flow freely to all people:

- "I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is 'the God of all grace,' in the apostle Peter's words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family." – Philip Yancey.

As we enjoyed that wonderful meal at Good and Plenty, Tom and I also learned what it means to be gathered at the table as God's people. It means that as we passed the plates of food so that we both received and gave, as the faith community who have received God's grace in Jesus Christ we are then called to pass that grace on to others, to be instruments of forgiveness and reconciliation, so that we might truly be the apostolic church that has received a double portion of the peace of Christ and is as generous in passing that grace, peace, and love on to others.

Amen.