

May 31, Pentecost (John 20:19-23)

“Receive the Holy Spirit” isn’t an invitation. It’s a command.

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

Behind locked doors, afraid of what might happen next, mulling over the level of risk in the community and the intentions of the authorities, the remaining disciples huddle in an upper room. Some stay frozen in shock, while others cycle rapidly through the stages of grief as Friday becomes Saturday becomes Sunday. This week’s text takes us inside the room, later on the day when Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb and encounters Jesus in the garden. In John’s Gospel, there is no 50-day wait for the Holy Spirit to arrive. Jesus appears and breathes the Spirit onto his followers as Easter Sunday becomes evening.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. He does not offer an invitation or allow an opportunity for avoidance. The Greek indicates a command, not “if you like” but “here, take it.” The Spirit is upon them and the power that comes with it, the forgiving and retaining of sins.

What do we make of that awe-filled responsibility? Some of us might be only too eager to act as spiritual judge and jury. Others would hesitate to get involved. In many churches we hesitate to judge our own members, much less to employ our collective power in measuring the sins of the world. Yet I think we must trust that the aid of the Spirit is part of the gift, empowering the receivers with not only authority and responsibility but also the capacity to discern when sins can be forgiven or must be retained.

Sin disrupts our relationship with God, and sin also harms others. I picture the impact of sin as it moves outward in concentric circles. Some sin causes injury in the small circle of people we know well or encounter face to face, while other sin causes injury in the wider community—whether to a particular class of people or to the population at large. Some sin creates hurt so widespread that it damages all of humankind.

While many of us have been taught that all sins are sin and therefore equally bad, Jesus' instruction to the disciples suggests otherwise. Forgiveness is made possible because we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, but they must also know when to retain sins, to hold onto them. Knowing the difference will be their job. It is perhaps more comfortable for us to say that this does not apply to us, that it applies only to 11 guys in the upper room, possibly along with the women who were paying the rent and subsidizing the groceries.

Some collective wrongdoing will never be like water under the bridge: the Holocaust, other genocides, all war crimes. The gravity of sin, however, cannot be measured only by the breadth of its consequences. A wrong inflicted on one person is not less meaningful than a wrong affecting many. Some personal sins can be forgiven but must never be forgotten, to prevent future harm.

I do believe that some actions are too sinful, too harmful, too evil to simply forgive, despite the help Lewis Smedes's book *Forgive and Forget* once was for me. Smedes taught that forgiving and forgetting the hurt perpetrated by others was part of our own healing. He did not, of course, mean that we ought to forget the abuse inflicted by another and stay in a bad situation. He meant, rather, that we can allow ourselves to let go of feelings about the people who hurt us. I find this useful for individuals, if the desire to forgive is genuine and is not the result of pressure from others.

Yet we must return to Jesus' instruction to those gathered in the upper room. To retain a sin is to hold onto it, to consider it with the weight it deserves. We hold onto particular sins not from a posture of bitterness or malice, but with a mature understanding of what cannot be sustained and supported by the human community. We agree collectively that some things are too terrible to put behind us, lest they be repeated by future generations—or by us next week or next year.

Whether the sin is thoughtless or intentional, personal or corporate, we have the aforementioned awe-filled responsibility. We must come to grips with the impact of sin and ensure that it is not conveniently hidden or cheaply absolved. The retaining of sins requires committed attention and just accountability. This is particularly important in an era like ours, in which the flow of information makes it hard not to let things go by and the influence of powerful and popular figures can outweigh the evidence we see with our own eyes.

The Acts account of Pentecost may seem more palatable than John's; it proclaims rather than commissions. When we gather with the worshiping community or consider the work of the church, it is more exciting to hear the grand story of wind and tongues of flame, and perhaps more comfortable, too. We might rather celebrate the birthday of the church than acknowledge our collective agency: the commission Christ gives in John 20 empowers us to be the church together.

Christ gives us an approach to the challenges that will always be with every faith community and in the wider world. He does not invite us to it. He says, "Take it." We are responsible for addressing sinful actions and decisions, wherever they fall in the concentric circles of human experience. With the power of the Holy Spirit, we can and must assess together the moral injuries perpetrated by sin and demand justice for the sins that we retain.