

This week marked the 90th birthday of Dr. Jane Goodall – most known for her advocacy for chimpanzees. In a birthday interview, Goodall shared her response to being told she should slow down. “With the little time I have and the magnitude of climate changing, I’m should speed up.”

When asked about her legacy, she hopes she’s inspired “humility in recognizing we humans are one with other animals, not above them. We’re all different, with much to learn from each other.” She was also asked as a scientist knowing the climate research, does she still have hope? She absolutely does because she sees people caring enough to act.

Goodall caused me to ponder what I hope my legacy will be. It’d have something to do with what we do here – listening for God’s living word. By the grace of God I hope I will have passed on a bit of the life-changing gift of Holy Scripture – meant for the youngest to the oldest.

Scripture is as gentle as a lamb yet as deep as the ocean – depending on where we stand. It’s good to hear the stories as children, allowing them to grow on us. They’ll guide us with wisdom if we’ll give them a chance.

I’m grateful for those whose chosen vocations of Biblical scholarship. I’m also grateful for your attentiveness to the preaching task. We’re not just sharing a little talk here each week. We’re opening the Word of life. Thank you for grappling with me.

Over the years I’ve gravitated to scholars who aren’t afraid of paradox or of challenging literal interpretations that exclude – missing the central point of love. I especially value the work of folks like Brueggemann, Schuessler-Fiorenza, Howard Thurman, Sandra Schneiders, and others.

It’s Jesuit scholar Sandra Schneiders whose scholarship transformed my heart this week. She shares my interest in inter-disciplinary work (like we’ve done here at LCM) – looking at things across disciplines allowing each to enrich the other – interconnecting faith with environmental sciences, psychology, history, anthropology, and more.

Sandra Schneiders has been interacting with scholars like depth psychologists and anthropologists on issues important not to church, but for society in general – like the ongoing problem of violence in the world.

Some say, Christianity is violent. We've just walked through Holy Week. There are varying interpretations of the death of Jesus – including seeing God's sending of the son to die as a way to appease God's wrath.

Others see it differently, including me – that what was going on is what we now call scapegoating. I'm not going to read you Schneiders' 30 page paper on this. I can get it to you if you want it, but I do want to share 3 of her sentences from the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Schneiders wrote,

“It's problematic to suggest Jesus was sacrificed by or to an angry God. Or that Jesus willed his own death. Jesus was murdered as a scapegoat by the collusion between a hierarchy manipulating a hysterical mob and a power structure shaped by a terrified tyrant for self-serving purposes.”

When I read that, I thought that's today's news. Collusions between hierarchies manipulating hysterical mobs and power structures of self-serving terrified tyrants. I think we understand the death of Jesus rightly as this kind of scapegoating murder, not as God's intent of violence.

God's response is to change violence not with more violence but with self-giving love. The gospels show us what God does – turns harm and hurt on its head by the incarnate presence of love. God doesn't respond to evil with evil, but with merciful love.

John's gospel, before us today, tells us “God so loves the world.” That's John 3:16 of course, and before that in John 1, we read, God sent Jesus “to take away the sin of the world.” Jesus comes to bring an end to violence. By today's text in John 20 – this work of “taking away sin” is amazingly given to us – through the power of God breathing on us.

After his crucifixion, the risen Jesus comes among the disciples and says, “Peace be with you.” Jesus doesn't yell at them, or demand repentance or ask for retribution. Nothing of that. Jesus repeats words of “Peace” and breathes on the very ones who abandoned and denied him. Jesus doesn't shame them. He befriends them, and sends them, empowered by his life.

It's incredible. “As the Father sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” He breathes on them from his risen life.

What blew me away in my reading of Dr. Schneiders is her criticism of what she sees as dangerous interpretations, including of what Jesus says next. We've heard, "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained" – assuming sin is retained.

But this isn't how Jesus acts. Jesus came to his followers, not just the 12, but others too, and Jesus doesn't remind them of how they've fallen short. Instead, Jesus moves them forward.

Richard Rohr might say, Jesus helps them "fall upward." Jesus' words are of "Peace" not blame, shame, or of holding onto each other's sins. Jesus' action is peace and reconciliation. He holds onto to them and empowers them to do the same.

Professor Schneiders interprets the Greek this way: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven. Whomever you hold fast are held fast." She's convinced the translation of "retaining sin" is untenable. It's the person who's retained, not the sin.

Jesus, sent to take away the sin of the world, wouldn't send us to retain sin. How more reasonable to see ourselves as sent as peace-makers as Jesus is – holding fast to each other rather than holding fast to sin.

You've heard the saying, "You are what you eat." Jesus says, "Be what you breathe." "Peace," Jesus repeats, "Peace be with you."

Breathe in this peace, friends. God's peace is renewed in you with every breath. Breathe it all in.

Amen

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