

The Reverend Canon Kirk T. Berlenbach  
Easter II, Year C

When it comes to gift giving some holidays are just easier than others. Father's Day may be the most difficult of them all. It regularly produces gifts that could best be described as "interesting." Now I admit that we dads are not always easy to buy for. And so, when Father's Day rolls around we get a profusion of ties and aftershave from Kohl's. But every once in a while, the kids get it right. A couple of years ago, my kids got me was this pin. It comes from Game of Thrones and it's a replica of the pin worn by the Hand of the King. For those of you who aren't left reeling from the chaos of this final season, the Hand is basically the King's chief of staff. Some kings delegate all their authority so they can live it up. Sometimes the Hand runs the kingdom because the King is too young or otherwise incapacitated. And sometimes the Hand uses their power to undermine the King and amass power for themselves. Whatever the case, the Hand of the King wields enormous authority and influence. Unfortunately, being in the thick of things also means that they tend not to live very long. So far there have been five men to serve as Hand and four of them were murdered. It didn't take me long to start to wonder if my kids were trying to send me some sort of subtle warning. Just to be on the safe side I have since forbidden them from owning crossbows.

But if we set aside all the politics and intrigue, I want you to imagine what it would feel like to be the Hand of the King. Imagine being invested with that much authority. Imagine having to answer to no one in the Kingdom save the King alone. To be entrusted with that much power must be both a remarkable privilege and incredibly heavy burden. But, it's just a fantasy. We won't ever have to worry about that, right?

A week after his resurrection Jesus appears to the disciples. They are in hiding because they are afraid that they too may be arrested or even killed. But Jesus doesn't focus on that. Instead he

comes to them and says "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." That second part may not sound like a big deal, but in fact he was entrusting them with enormous power. In one fell swoop Jesus was promoting them from the ranks of fisherman to something akin to being the high priest.

The High Priest was kind of like the Hand, not of a king, but of G-D. The High Priest they now spoke for G-D, they mediated between G-D and the people and they served as proxy in pronouncing that the people's sins were forgiven.

Needless to say, this kind of authority wasn't just bestowed on anyone. Priests were a special class of people. They had to have the right heritage, special training and commitment. They had to live apart from the rest of society and were expected to follow even more than the usual 613 religious laws. Becoming High Priest came as the result of a lifetime of preparation and commitment. The forgiving of sins was their most solemn duty. In order to pronounce that the people's sins were forgiven the High Priest had to live in the temple for a week undergoing many purifying rituals, even for sins he probably never committed. Absolute purity was essential. Then, and only then could the High Priest speak as G-D's proxy.

So now imagine what it meant for Jesus to come to his disciples, none of whom were part of the priestly class, and tell them that he was investing them with the power to act as G-D's highest representative on earth! It simply defied belief. It's kind of like instantly going from being a truck driver to Pope. They were now G-D's highest representative. It was bad enough when Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven. At least he was a rabbi and a prophet. But now he was bestowing this same incredible power to his disciples? It's a complete paradigm shift in how G-D would be represented on earth. No longer would it be through a single, elevated Hand

who was tied down to a static place and rigid system. Through the Holy Spirit G-D had just empowered many Hands to heal and forgive and to share the Good News wherever they went. And this is where you come in. All of us are heirs to those original disciples. And that means that, just as he did in the Gospel, Jesus invests each one of us with his authority and sends us forth to carry on the work in His name. By virtue of the Holy Spirit there are now hundreds of millions of high priests and you are one of them. You have been empowered to act on G-D's behalf. You have been called to do things normally relegated to patriarchs, high priests and pontiffs. In essence you have been called to serve as the Hand of our heavenly King.

That's a lot to take in. Because even now, even here in the open and progressive Episcopal Church, there is still a hierarchy which can make it hard to accept your power. When it comes to representing G-D we continue to elevate a few people over the average believer. I'm the one standing up here dressed in funny clothes. I say most of the important words. Yet the truth is that you are called to be G-D's holy Hand in the world just as much as I am.

That's a lot of power. It's also a lot of pressure. Before you go and start worrying about exactly what it means to forgive or retain someone else's sins, let's take a step back. It's not very productive to spend too much time dwelling on these two short sentences of scripture. What truly matters is that Jesus has sent you to carry on his work. In all of your mundane, fallen and sinful imperfection, you have been empowered to act as G-D's proxy... to take up the work and ministry that Jesus devoted himself to while he walked on this earth.

What this means is that you are now the primary means by which other people can get to know G-D. You are to represent him and act on his behalf, not just in the matter of forgiving or retaining sins but in everything you do. People will make judgments about G-D based on what you say and do. If you show mercy and compassion, then in their minds so does G-D. If you're

a judgmental jerk, well then G-D probably is too. So, whether you like it or not, once you claim the name of Christian, you are invested with his authority and are acting in his name.

What an awesome and terrible responsibility! Yet you do not have to rely on your own power in order to do it. For through the Holy Spirit, G-D dwells with you, walking with you and acting through you, giving you the grace you need to accomplish things you could never dream of attempting on your own.

You may not have known it when you walked in here but when you leave this place you will be acting as G-D chosen representative. G-D- the Creator of all that is, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords- the One that was and is and is to be- that same G-D his calling you to continue the holy work that Jesus started in His name. And it doesn't matter whether you have been trained at seminary or how if you know all the words of our liturgy or even if you can quote much scripture. Because you have been granted the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if you use that gift as G-D intends, you can accomplish a world of good. You can feed the hungry, comfort those who mourn, lift up the downtrodden, speak for those who have no voice and help others to know G-D. By the same token, if you neglect or abuse our special status as G-D's Hand, you can also alienate them and push them further away.

You have been named Hand of our Heavenly King. You may not feel up to the task. You may not feel worthy. You may not want the responsibility. But that doesn't matter. The King has spoken. Jesus has pinned the badge of office on your and sent you out to carry on his work.

What will you do with such an incredible gift? AMEN