

Peace the World Cannot Provide
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
May 2, 2010
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Scripture: Psalm 46
John 20:19-23

What is peace to you?

In this relentless, media-driven era, is it freedom from the encroachment of the world?
Especially technology?

Do you have any friends who add a one-line morsel of wisdom at the bottom of their emails? Last week, I received an email from someone and, there at the bottom, after the person's name, was this nugget:

“Computers save time the way kudzu stops soil erosion.”

It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it? For all that computers have added to our lives, it does feel at times as if they are taking over ...cell phones, email, Twitter, Facebook and all the rest, leaving less and less room for peace, at least momentary peace.

Or, when you think of peace, do you think of the opposite of military conflict? When I was a child, my bed-time prayer was simple – “Dear God, Feed the poor and stop the war.” It rhymed – and that helped me remember to say it. But that prayer – particularly that part about war - was more a reflection of the fact that I saw footage from Vietnam every night on the news with Huntley and Brinkley.

Now we live in an age of terrorism, a time of sleeper cells and rogue governments with enough plutonium to make dirty bombs. Peace, as simply the opposite of war, seems more evasive than ever.

Or is peace something deep down in your soul – something between you and yourself? This week, one of you told me a story about spending 48 hours alone in the woods on an Outward Bound trip. He described the progression of his emotions as – annoyance that he had to do this ... to restlessness over what to do with the time ... to a realization that there was no way out of it ... to a reintroduction to his abilities and new level of comfort with himself and himself alone.

What is peace to you?

As we continue our sermon series on the words of the risen Christ, we arrive at an opportunity to pause and consider peace in the words Christ spoke to his disciples and in how those words speak to us today.

The scene is in those first hours after the tomb is found empty. Mary Magdalene had encountered Christ and done as he asked – she had gone straightaway to tell the disciples the miraculous news. But the disciples were scared, so they locked themselves in the upper room of a home while they figured out what to do next. Suddenly Christ appears – just appears – and greets them, saying: “Peace be with you.” Christ seems to know the disciples will need proof his identity, so he displays his wounded hands, where nails had been, and his side, where the soldiers had plunged a sword to make sure he was dead. Then he said it again, softly filling the room that must have been gripped in stunned silence.

“Peace be with you.”

Those words formed a common greeting in those days, the equivalent of someone meeting you today and saying, “How are you?” Christ himself uses ‘peace’ as both a greeting and a parting word on multiple occasions.

Readers of the New Testament epistles know also that the word “peace” is often used as part of an opening or a closing of those letters. Coupled with the words “grace” or “mercy”, the Apostle Paul and others use it that way 22 times.

So, there in the upper room in John 20, which is it – an innocuous ice-breaker to ease the tension and awe the disciples felt? Or something more?

Maybe it was a bit of both. We do that today, don’t we? A phrase we may truly mean becomes so familiar. It rolls right off our tongue so easily that we don’t stop and think about how it may sound to someone unaccustomed to hearing it.

I experienced this as a kid. My family frequently visited my grandfather’s farm in Mississippi. My uncle lived in the same community. On the day we would leave to go back home to Atlanta, we would exchange hugs and load into the car. Every time, my uncle would stand at the edge of the drive as we drove away. He would wave goodbye and shout out, “Y’all come see us.” I remember thinking: “But we were just here ...?” Clearly I was a city slicker with lots yet to learn in the ways of southern speech.

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Maybe that's what Christ was up to with his understated greeting, "Peace be with you." Maybe Christ said it twice – because he wanted his disciples to hear this as both a calming greeting and a post-resurrection blessing of the most profound kind, a blessing that had already come true in Christ's victory over sin and death.

The Greek word for peace that the author of the Gospel of John uses provides a telling clue. The word is *eirene*, a word that comes from the Greek verb "to join" – as in to bring together. Before mass manufacturing, a joiner was the craftsman who made the wood parts fit tightly. Think of how two sides of a drawer in a dresser come together. The teeth of one piece fit perfectly with the teeth of the other to form a joint. In very best furniture, joints such as that use no glue or nails because the fit is so tight and durable.

In this sense, then, the word Jesus uses for peace brings up images of separate elements or things that are fit perfectly together. What might that mean for us as individuals? For communities of people – whether races, nations, religions or ideologies?

As for individuals, think about how we describe people we know who are under duress: We say they are "torn apart" or they are "broken up" over something. Here in the South, we might even combine those phrases to say a friend or relative is "tore up" over the loss of a loved one or even a favorite pet. The pieces of their person that held them together have come loose.

Now think about how we describe healing: We say a person has been made "whole" again. Or if someone who had been in trouble were doing better, we might say they got their "stuff back together."

Perhaps in using this word for "peace" Jesus was getting at something we all know to be true. Perhaps he was saying that as individuals true peace comes when we are healed and whole, when the inward parts that Psalm 139 speaks of, parts of us the world forces loose, are knit together again as God first made us.

Surely the disciples felt discombobulated in those hours they locked themselves in the upper room. Surely they felt as if their world had fallen apart, that, with the beloved messiah gone, they would never be able to put the pieces of their lives back together.

Then, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

After showing the disciples his hands and side, he said it again, and he elaborated. “ ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.’”

The path to peace, Christ says, is forgiveness. Forgiveness of ourselves. Forgiveness of others. Even forgiveness of our enemies, just as Christ asked God to forgive those who crucified him. And that which equips us to forgive is the Holy Spirit.

Fans of the 1990s comedy “Seinfeld” may remember an episode when Frank Costanza gets advice from his doctor about how to handle his high blood pressure. His doctor advises Frank to softly repeat the phrase “serenity now.” But, of course, the volatile character does just the opposite, screaming “SERENITY NOW!” every time he is annoyed.

Seinfeld reminds us that there are no quick and easy paths to true peace. No magic sayings, no short cuts. True peace within us comes from beyond us. The peace that passes understanding comes in knowing that our sins are forgiven, in and through Christ, who commands us to forgive ourselves and one another in his name, in response to the grace we can never earn.

Today, we celebrate the sacrament of communion. We recognize the bread as a symbol of Christ’s body, broken for us and for our healing. In Christ, we are made whole again. Christ is the joiner who puts us at one with our creator.

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So, what about peace in our world, among peoples, nations, races, religions and ideologies?

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew idea of peace, shalom, is achieved through covenant, the joining together of two people or nations based on mutually assured obligations and benefits.

And, as with Christ’s notion of peace, it is always joined with justice, what one scholar calls “an organic relationship.” Where justice is planted, peace will grow. But it also works in the opposite direction. We receive the gift of God’s peace when we do justice.

We will see how justice produces peace when the common good prevails over rugged individualism. We will see how justice delivers peace, when legislation is good news for

the poor, the elderly, children and the disadvantaged. We will see how the seed of justice flowers in peace when our nation distributes its resources to reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

When we know better than to allow the kind of environmental disaster we are helplessly watching in the Gulf of Mexico, we will, as the bumper sticker says, know justice and know peace.

Here in Charlotte, when we provide affordable housing for all in true need and when we properly fund our public schools we will see how justice joined with peace makes us a different kind of world class city.

Surely principles like these transcend political and ideological divisions, surely they are the stuff of common sense, surely, one day, we – as a community and as a world - will abide by these just ways and find the peace that justice produces.

In the meantime, we are sent, just as Christ sent his disciples into the world with the promise of a “peace the world cannot provide.” We are surrounded by the same Holy Spirit that Christ breathed on them, the breath of the Prince of Peace. And, joined with Christ in our baptism, fed by this sacrament of communion, we are made whole again and we hear the words Christ told his friends:

“In the world, you face persecution. But take courage. I have conquered the world.”¹

Amen

¹ John 16:33