

January 4, 2004
Second Sunday of Christmas
David L. Edwards

Let the Peace of Christ Rule in Your Hearts

Colossians 3:12-17 *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
to which indeed you were called in the one body.*

*Shining the light of awareness on the roots of violence within
our own hearts and thoughts, we can stop the war where it begins,
in our minds. Stopping the war in our minds and in our hearts,
we will surely know how to stop the war outside.*

--Thich Nhat Hanh,
Creating True Peace

This morning I want to continue working with the passage from Paul's Letter to the Colossians. It is a beautiful summary of the Christian life, which is life that is truly human, the way God created us to be and to live. The first three verses, which we looked at last week, seem to deal with the transforming of our personal inner life so that we grow in the new life God has given us in Christ, in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and most of all in love. As we work daily with our inward journey, through times of prayer, silence, study, and reflection, we are watering the seeds of this new life in ourselves.

Paul also wants to speak about our life together, which he does in the remainder of the passage. Life in Christ, which is both gift and calling, is fulfilled and sustained in community. This is done as we let the word about Christ dwell in the community, through worship and study, reminding us of who we are and are called to be. It also has to do with how, as Paul writes, we "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom." This means being accountable to one another for our continued spiritual growth, always seeking the wisdom that comes from God. Paul highlights the importance of worshipping together, particularly singing together. Singing binds us together and stirs up gratitude. And finally Paul says that whatever we do in word or deed, we are to do it in the name, the spirit of Christ, giving thanks to God through him. This is our outward journey of service in Christ.

I want to focus on one verse, which is a kind of bridge between the individual and the communal. "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." This touches our longing for peace within ourselves. We become so filled with tensions and conflicts, anxieties and agitations. Our inner life becomes so crowded with worry, guilt, conflicts, and dealing with wounds from the past or fears about the future, that we are hardly ever truly open to who or what is right around us in the present moment. Our days roll by without having really been lived. There is wondrous beauty all around us, in the creation, in other people, but we scarcely notice or appreciate it because our lack of inner peace distracts our energy and awareness.

When we see what is happening in the world, the terrible waste and destruction of war, hate, and greed, it is easy to feel desperate and hopeless if we do not have peace within ourselves. Yet we want to be peacemakers, people who speak for and promote peace.

What is the solution? Paul tells us to allow Christ's peace rule in our hearts. As urgent as the work of peacemaking is in the world, it has to start with our own lives, our own hearts and minds and relationships. How can we be credible spokespersons for

peace and justice if we do not have peace in ourselves? If we do not have peace in ourselves, our words about peace and justice, even our actions, are empty and without power.

In the peace movement of the 1960s and early 70s there was much anger and hate. While many were making the connection between peace in their own personal lives and the ending of war, others were filled with rage. I understand the anger we feel when destruction of life is carried out in our name, when we see lives treated as expendable and worthless as happens in all wars. We feel powerless to stop it, though we want to with all our heart. This brings frustration and anger.

Yet it is so important to live what we believe, to BE peace as we work for peace. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and Zen master, now in his seventies. As a young monk in South Vietnam during the war Nhat Hanh organized Buddhist peace work in many villages, helping people survive the assaults from both sides. He saw the worst of the war and saw many of his fellow monks and peace workers murdered by the North and the South. He and others refused to take sides but worked constantly to maintain their own inner peacefulness so that they could be agents of compassion and understanding.

Nhat Hanh writes: “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time. If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we cannot share peace and happiness with others, even those we love, those who live under the same roof. If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.” (Being Peace, p. 3)

In John’s gospel, Jesus says to his disciples before he leaves them: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.” He is saying, “I am giving you peace. So be at peace. Let this peace live and grow in you.” It is a peace that does not come from the “the world.” “The world,” in John’s gospel, is not the creation but the world gone astray, wandering off from what is good and true and loving, the world of people who have lost awareness of God.

Christ invites us to live in the peace that comes from God, from the deepest truth of life. And Paul says the same. Let the peace of Christ, the peace Christ gives us, live in your heart and mind, the core of your being. Let it rule in your hearts and minds. It is the passive voice—allow this peace to be in you. Simply accept the gift of peace that Christ brings. You don’t have to achieve anything. Simply receive Christ’s peace.

And what is this peace? It is the peace of our unity with God and with the world as God’s creation. It is the peace of knowing and receiving in Christ a life that is reconciled to God and in harmony with ourselves, others, and the world around us. It is the peace of being accepted and affirmed at the core of our being, that we are God’s “chosen and beloved,” as Paul said earlier. It is the peace that knows grace is the foundation of life, that life itself is a gift from God to be received and lived with joy and thanksgiving. It is the peace that tells us, no matter what the voices of the world say, that we are cherished by God, gifted by God, and called by God to live beautiful and meaningful lives.

Paul says that we must let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and minds. The word Paul uses means something like “umpire” or “referee.” Christ’s peace is a kind of judge or referee to which we bring all the struggles of our lives. Christ’s peace is not so much a constant state of calm as it is a dynamic inner process by which we maintain our equilibrium. The image of a gyroscope comes to mind, keeping a great ship in balance. When we find ourselves filling with anger, we go to Christ’s peace and simply let that peace shine on our anger, relieving it, calming it. Not driving it away, not turning our

inner life into a battlefield. But allowing Christ's peace to speak to our anger, our fear, our anxieties.

We can cultivate and nurture this peace in ourselves if we have a serious and committed inward journey. If we set aside at least one time each day to quiet ourselves, to pray, to breathe, to reflect on what is going on inside us, then we can become those who walk, speak, and live peacefully. To simply sit quietly, breathing, letting ourselves become very present and aware is practicing God's grace. It is putting into practice the Good News itself, that in Christ we receive God's grace and love in full, as a complete gift.

We cannot, however, find and maintain this peace alone and by ourselves. We need a community that practices Christ's peace. That's what the church is. That's what we are to be here. This is what I think Paul means by the rest of his sentence: "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." We are called to Christ's peace, to be people who embody this peace. But this call to being Christ's peace is sounded in the community, where that peace is sustained and nurtured. Christ's peace is embodied in community.

Jesus called together disciples not only to do the work of the kingdom of God but also to be together in a different way. The church is a community of those who are living out in their life together the love of Christ, the peace of Christ. It is in community that forgiveness becomes real, that unconditional love is practiced, that the stranger is welcomed and affirmed, that we are reminded of who we really are when we become isolated in guilt or fear or self-condemnation. It is in community that we are called again to hope when we have become filled with hopelessness. It is in community that the vision of God's kingdom is lifted up for us when we lose that vision of a world transformed in God's love, peace, and justice.

This is why the Church of the Covenant has always defined the church in terms of community, not an organization. The peace of Christ is found and sustained in a community of persons committed to one another in love and to their own personal spiritual growth. The solidity of our community is rooted in persons who are working daily with their spiritual lives, through disciplines that ground them in Christ and his peace. To the degree that this is happening, we are a community in which all can touch peace and become peace. To the degree that it is not happening, we become an uncentered community in which it is very hard to touch Christ's peace. Our personal commitments to the inward journey sustain a community of Christ's peace. Our life together as a community in which the peace of Christ rules sustains our personal lives of faith.

There is no greater work for us than that of letting Christ's peace rule in our hearts and our community. If our inner life is a battleground, if we are not at peace within ourselves as persons or a community, then we cannot really offer anything to the world of war and violence. It is not that we quit doing those things that make for peace and justice and focus on our inner lives alone. The call is to be a people of Christ's peace as well as those who speak and act for peace. The roots of war, misunderstanding, and hostility are in each of us. When we become aware of it and do the work of watering seeds of peace in ourselves, we truly make a difference in the world, not just by what we do but by who we are.