

May 16, 2004/Sixth Sunday of Easter  
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### **The Peace of Christ**

John 14:25-27 *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*

*How foolish it is, how terrible, if you have not found your Island of Peace within your own soul! It means that you are living without the discovery of your true home. --Howard Thurman, Meditations of the Heart*

*...we, members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another that each of us will...Develop my prayer life through setting aside daily the time needed for this purpose. --“Our Covenant One with Another”*

In our reading for this morning, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be with the disciples to teach them and remind them of his words. He gives them his peace, a peace in their lives that the world is not able to offer. And he tells them not to let their hearts be troubled or afraid.

The Holy Spirit is God’s energizing, teaching, and leading presence with us. God’s spirit keeps us grounded in Jesus’ teachings. God’s spirit deepens our understanding of the life to which Christ calls us.

In John’s gospel, the Holy Spirit comes as we live Jesus’ commandment to love one another. Just before our reading today Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” (14:15-16) As we endeavor in the life of love, as we devote ourselves to the life of following Christ, we find that we aren’t alone! Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Advocate. There is a Power that is with us, on our side. That Presence and Power is experienced as an Advocate, a helper, strengthener, comforter. God’s spirit is with us as we work with the practices of prayer, study, worship, giving, mission, the specific and concrete ways we respond to the commandment to love. So we experience the Holy Spirit as we live the journey of discipleship. Sitting around and waiting for God’s spirit to move us doesn’t work. An old story says that God didn’t part the waters of the Red Sea until the first Israelite jumped in. It is as we move out in faith that we experience the comfort, guidance, strength, and teaching of God’s spirit. As we move in the direction of what we are called to do for the sake of life, we experience a Power that accompanies and leads us.

When Jesus gave his disciples his peace, he knew what his disciples needed most. Jesus knew that the life to which he called his disciples was contrary to so much that surrounded them—the “world.”

The “world” in John’s gospel means something quite particular. It is not really the world as creation, made good by God. It is not just the physical reality of the world. The “world” in John’s gospel refers to the persons and structures and forces that move contrary to God’s will for life. The “world” is the world in rebellion. When Pilate has Jesus before him at trial, he asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews. “My kingdom is not from this world,” answers Jesus. Pilate hasn’t a clue what Jesus is talking about. They are from two different worlds, literally worlds apart. One is about power politics, coercion and getting one’s way with violence. The other is about servanthood, giving oneself for the sake of life. One world skims the surface layer of existence. The other world knows the deeper reality of life, that life flows from and is grounded in the sacred dimension and that true life cannot be found unless we live out of our relationship with God, the creator of life, our lives in harmony with the flow of God’s purposes.

When we live in Christ, following Christ, his kingdom is our kingdom. Our lives, too, are not from this world but have that different, deeper source. This in no way means that we are detached from life, the everyday concerns and needs of this earth and its people. Later in Chapter 17 of John’s gospel, Jesus prays to God that God protect his disciples as they live in the world. They are not to be taken out of the world but are sent into the world as those who have truth to bear and share. And the world into which we are sent is precisely the world that is messed up, hurting, full of violence and confusion. Not an escape from but a mission into—that’s the movement of our faith. Following this movement of faith into the world and not away from it, however, does not mean that we go as though into enemy territory, with arrogant and hostile spirits. We go with compassion, with mercy, with nonviolence of action and spirit. When we make that turning toward the world with a servant spirit, then we are met with God’s spirit that advocates us, meets us with encouragement, guidance, and insight.

We are, for example, to live in the world that wants to persuade us of the reasonableness and rightness of war as those who belong to the world of Jesus, in which he teaches nonviolence, non-retaliation, and love of enemies. The last week or so has revealed more of the truth about war. Hooded zealots cry “God is great!” as they behead a human being. Military guards at an Iraqi prison treat human beings as objects for sadistic pleasure, while our leaders continue to call on God to bless our nation and its war. Some say these actions do not reflect the true American spirit. Actually, they do. They are the outcome of the arrogant and violent spirit fueled by the rhetoric of revenge and nationalism that launched this latest war. These are not two different worlds, but the same world. This is not the plain of life upon which we are called to live. We are called to live as those who are from another world, the world of God’s creation, in which

all nations, all peoples are blessed and loved by God, and all nations, including our own, stand under God's judgment because of violence, lack of compassion, and injustice.

The difference between these two worlds is also seen in the environmental crisis. To see the world as an object for our use and exploitation, and to destroy it for the sake of our own selfish appetites, is to be part of that "world" John's gospel talks about, the world in rebellion to God and God's purposes for life. But to know the world as the creation of God, to understand the interrelatedness and interdependence of all life and its delicate balance, is to be in the world as those who know its true nature and know what it takes to live in harmony with it. That's what it means for our "kingdom" to be not from this world.

Living as those whose kingdom is not from this world is difficult. Encountering daily the "world" that is bent on destruction, violence, and self-centeredness, as those who are striving to belong to that other world, that deeper and truer world, is very hard. It is hard just to become aware of how our own hearts and minds have been lulled into the false thinking and values that are all around us. The violence in our own hearts. The arrogance of spirit. The disregard and disconnection with which we walk upon this earth, the creation. The easy path is detachment from struggles or discomfort. The easy path is withdrawal into a religion of escape or of partnership with the "world," as John calls it. But Jesus calls us to the difficult path, the narrow gate that leads precisely into the world, living in one world as those who belong to the other, true world.

This is why Jesus speaks about not letting our hearts be troubled or afraid. Living faithfully in the world can stir up fear and anxiousness. The world, in John's sense of the word, presses in on us and invades our minds and hearts. At times we feel overwhelmed. At other times we may wonder how we will ever make it out of the mess we are in. Jesus' peace, however, comes to us to give us a center that will hold amidst all that we face and experience. Howard Thurman, the great African American theologian, pastor, and mystic, called this center "an Island of Peace within our souls." It is that core of our being, call it consciousness, or awareness, or soul. It is that center of who we are where we can enter and be at peace, and where God speaks to us of our true belonging. Our practice of daily meditation, silence, and prayer is the regular touching of that center. This is the importance of the discipline of Covenant Membership that speaks of practicing prayer on a daily basis, setting aside the time needed for this purpose.

What are the fears and anxiousness that dwell in your spirit? What are the worries that keep you from the joy of being simply alive as one loved eternally by God? What are the things that trouble you and keep you from sleep or being able to relax, the things that are not relieved by all your anxiousness and preoccupation? Receiving Christ's

peace doesn't mean we don't have fears and anxieties. It means that we bring them into the sanctuary of our own spirits, hold them there, become aware of them, and let Christ's peace speak to them and calm them. We don't add another layer of anxiety on ourselves by feeling guilty that we have fears and troubled hearts. We use our times of silence, meditation, and prayer to let those things be embraced by Christ's peace.

We can receive Christ's peace and dwell in that peace only as we are able more and more to be present, to come back from the past and back from the future, and be as completely present as we can be. This is the first work of prayer, and it is so basic and simple. It involves what Buddhists call "stopping and quieting." It is what Brother Lawrence called the "practice of the presence of God." It is no more complicated than sitting, breathing, calming, listening. Christ is always offering us his peace, but most of the time he cannot catch up with us. We are here and there, stuck in the past or wandering out in the future. But when we sit in a quiet place, breathe easily and with awareness, and simply listen to what is going on in us and around us, then we are moving into the present where we meet God, where we experience Christ's peace. This is a very important practice of prayer.

Last week I attended a family session for persons who are in a recovery program for addictions. I was there so that I could visit our friend Ron. The room was full of parents, spouses, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, all of whom shared the pain and chaos of having a family member who is addicted. Listening to these persons and to the counselors who spoke to us about addiction and the way it affects families, and listening to Ron, I realized how not only true but life-saving is this capacity to come back to the present, to live fully in the present. Addiction is not curable but treatable. The addicted person manages the addiction only by living one moment at a time, one day at a time, depending upon that Higher Power that is encountered in the present. The grand schemes, the confusing manipulations, the tendencies to always complain about the world or other people—none of these things had any effect on the addiction and were in fact symptoms of the addiction. Of the many things I learned that evening, this one stood out: each of us must, for the sake of life itself, establish that island of peace within our souls and enter it as often as we can. For there we root ourselves in reality, in God, and in peace that does not come from outside us, from the world around us.

This deep inner peace is not a luxury. It is not self-indulgence. It is not an escape from life. It is the great gift Christ gives us so that we can live in the world as those who belong to the real world, the world that God has made, loves, and is working to bring to completion.