

Being Peace, Living Peace

John 20:19-31 *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."*

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening.
–Parker Palmer

Our reading from John's gospel speaks to three dimensions of the life of faith: what we call the inward journey, the life of prayer in its fullest possible sense; the outward journey, the work that God calls us to in the service of life; and what faith really means, not beliefs but a life of trustful living.

First, the risen Christ appears to the disciples in a house where they have locked themselves in. They are afraid of "the Jews," says John. We must be careful here. John is not talking about Judaism or the Jewish people as a whole. He is talking about the religious leadership and others who conspired to do away with Jesus because he was perceived as a threat. John's gospel has been misused through the centuries to fuel anti-Jewish prejudice and violence. John knows full well that Jesus and his disciples were Jews and never saw themselves as anything but Jews. The main thing here is that the disciples are afraid of a world that they experience as hostile to the way of life they have learned in Jesus.

Jesus' very first words to his disciples are: Peace be with you! In the midst of the things that scare us, whether outside or inside us, in the midst of this human world that gets so lost in violence, greed, and hatred, in the midst of our struggles as follow the spiritual path of Jesus...in the midst of all our fears, Jesus says: Peace be with you!

Earlier in John's gospel (14:27), Jesus is talking to the disciples just before his arrest. He says: Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give you peace the way the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. The peace Jesus gives, even commands, is rooted in our belonging to God. It does not remove us from the challenges of life. It does not gloss over the difficult realities of life. It is a deep and solid awareness of God, our relationship with God, and God's steadfast love for the world and for us.

Being at peace is the first "work," if you will, of the spiritual life. Yet being at peace is hard. There is much that IS fearful and worrisome about life. The spiritual issue for us as a community of Jesus is how we respond to our fears. If we allow ourselves to be governed by our fear or anxiousness, then we have little to offer that is life giving. We only add to the mess. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount: Why do you worry? Why are you anxious? Your worry you can't add one single hour to your lifetime!

(Matt. 6:27) We know today that worry and anxiousness, in the form of excessive stress, actually removes hours, if not years, from our lives!

Being at peace takes spiritual work, practicing awareness of our fears, worries, or anxieties, understanding where they come from, what they are rooted in. When we begin to understand what is going on in us, our fear already begins to diminish. We are no longer afraid of our fears! We are no longer anxious about our anxieties! Sounds simple, doesn't it? Actually, it is simple. We just don't do it. We run from fear or anxiousness. We don't know that we can just sit, be aware of what is going on in us, and let it be there. Not trying to drive it out. Not giving ourselves little moral lectures— Oh, if I were a stronger person, I wouldn't be afraid or worried or depressed! We just receive this wonderful word from Jesus: Peace be with you! It is not that we don't experience fear or worry or anxiousness as people of faith. It's just that we can, in the peace Jesus is talking about, not let them control us. It is simple, but it takes practice.

This has to do with what we call the inward journey, the life of prayer. Committing ourselves to regular practices of prayer, silence, meditation, self-understanding, and study gives our lives a framework that helps us to touch the peace Christ is talking about. To make this a regular, daily practice is difficult at first. We are still running from our fears, or letting unacknowledged fears shape the way we relate to others, the world around us, and ourselves. When we take time each day for quietness, becoming aware of our inner life, understanding the things that are making us afraid or angry or depressed, we are already practicing the peace Jesus is talking about. When we keep a journal of our insights about ourselves, we grow in our understanding of what makes us "tick," and with understanding comes acceptance and with acceptance comes change. It all has to do with each of us and us together working with Christ's call to be at peace with ourselves and thus with each other.

The world desperately needs communities of faith that are working with being at peace, that are taking Jesus seriously when he says, "Peace be with you." We have enough religious communities that are always in turmoil and conflict, or lost in a flurry of activism, or that take themselves so seriously that they exude a spirit of anxiousness. We have more than enough religious communities that are aggressive and seeking to extend their power and influence over others. Religious and spiritual domination. The community of Jesus has nothing to do with such things. It is known by the peace that is present and practiced within it.

Over thirty years ago I took my first silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Thomas Merton's monastery. I admired Merton and since I was only a year out of seminary and already burning out, I thought I might as well give it a shot! This was the beginning of my taking seriously a spiritual practice of prayer. It was the point at which I stopped running from my fears. As I drove away from Gethsemani after three days of silence, I felt a profound gratitude for that community. It is not a community

without tensions and conflicts. Merton's writings about life there tell us that. Yet it is a community devoted to living in the peace Christ commands us to have, a peace within a world that is so tumultuous, so lost in confused values and directions. It was like an anchor for the world, or a wellspring of sanity and spiritual clarity.

I think the Church of the Covenant is called to be such a community and already is such a community. People come here for worship or to walk the grounds or to spend time in retreat. Adults, young people, and children come into the Festival Center downtown. And often I hear words such as, "This is such a peaceful place." I think it is true. We try to create places in which people can touch the peace of Christ, the peace of God, places where we can more clearly touch the sacred dimension of life and our own lives.

Yet it is this way because we strive to be a community of Christ's peace. We make a commitment to work in our individual lives with spiritual practices that help us touch peace. We have mission groups (not committees) that commit to spiritual practices that ground the group in peace and in the vision to which it feels called. We don't do it perfectly. That's not the point. The point is the desire, the commitment, and the effort to keep touching the peace of Christ in the midst of our fears, conflicts, and the tremendous needs of the world. This is all the work of the inward journey, individually and together.

Then Jesus does a strange thing. He breathes on the disciples. As God sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. This is the outward journey, the impulse and energy of God's spirit filling and leading us. It grows out of the inward journey. Being grounded in the peace we have because of our relationship with God, we live out of that relationship and the spirit we receive in it. We are no longer governed by what the world around us tells us we should be or do. It is what Jesus meant at his trial when he told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world."

I would put it this way: As people of faith, we are to live our lives out of our authentic selves, the unique persons God made us to be, giving to the world what God made us and gifted us to give. We resist the impulse to respond to every need, every request, every expectation that others might have of us. It means that we work with our inner life to be aware when we are living out of guilt or obligation rather than the freedom of call, of what God has given us to be and to do.

This is crucial in our community as we work with different missions. When a ministry or mission begins to flag or lose focus, when those involved begin to feel more obligation than joy, then it is time to let go and look at the basic motives out of which we are living. Are we living out of call or obligation? It is time to go back to our breathing...breathing in the spirit of God. We do no one any good if we are living out of a deadening sense of guilt or obligation. That leads to resentment and hostility. Breathing in the spirit of God leads us to what we truly feel called to do. And that is what is life giving for the world and ourselves.

I love this image of Jesus breathing on the disciples. Biblically the word for spirit is the same as breath or wind. Breathing is fundamental to our lives physically and spiritually. Spiritual practices, including Christian practice, over the centuries have emphasized the importance of our breathing as a part of prayer. When we breathe and are aware of our breathing, we become more present, more aware of life within us and around us. When we become anxious and fearful, we go back to our breathing and it leads us into the present moment where the spirit of God can work, can fill us, can begin once again to lead us. I would suggest that we take our breathing very seriously as a spiritual practice and a part of praying. It leads us back into peace and it fills us with the spirit of God that leads us into ministry.

Finally, the story of Thomas and the meaning of faith. We don't know why Thomas was not with the other disciples when the risen Christ first appeared. The others go and tell him about it. He doubts the whole thing. Let's not judge Thomas negatively. Maybe Thomas' deep grief over Jesus' death was something he needed to handle by himself, apart from the others (William Barclay). Maybe he doubted the report about Jesus because he couldn't bear it if were not true.

So Jesus appears again, and Thomas is there. Again the first words out of Jesus' mouth are: Peace be with you! Then he shows Thomas the wounds from his crucifixion. Immediately Thomas believes that it is all true and real. But Jesus responds: Did you believe because of proofs? Did you believe because you had to know for sure? It is so much better for those who believe without seeing, who live their life in faith without having proofs, without having to know everything is sure and certain.

This leaves us with the meaning of faith. The life of faith, the inward journey of touching the peace Christ gives, the outward journey of breathing in and being led by God's spirit...this life of faith is not about intellectual certainties or never having any doubts. The primary meaning of "faith" in scripture is not the holding of firm convictions. It is about living our lives trustfully, being open, able to be led by the spirit of God. It is not about clinging to sure things or holding onto rock-solid religious ideas. And it is certainly not about the kind of religious arrogance that we see today in some Christians as well as some in other religious traditions. It is about a journey, a way of living in the world—at peace in the midst of fears and challenges, open to the breath of God's spirit, and doing what we feel God has put us on this earth to do, using the diverse gifts that God has given us in the service of life.