

A Community of Christ's Peace

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

Chapter 3 of Paul's Letter to the Colossians contains a beautiful summary of the Christian life, which is to say, 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, call us to put on and grow into the life of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and, most of all, love. As we give attention daily to our inward journey, through times of prayer, silence, study, and reflection, we are watering the seeds of this new life in ourselves. We come to a fuller, deeper understanding of our lives and relationships. We begin to see how we can become more expressive of the kind of life manifest in Jesus.

However, Paul is not primarily speaking to individuals, but to a community. When he says "you," it is always the plural—"you all," as we say in the South. Paul is interested in our life together as a community of Jesus. So he writes: "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." Christ's peace is to rule, you might say, in our communal heart, our life together. The work of peacemaking in the world is important and urgent. Yet, it has to be rooted in our own lives, our own hearts and minds and relationships. If we do not have peace in and among ourselves, our words about peace and justice, even our actions, are empty and without power.

Let the peace of Christ, God's own peace, rule in your hearts, in the core of your being. Paul uses the passive voice—allow this peace to be in you. Simply accept the gift of peace that Christ brings. It is not about achieving something. It is about RECEIVING Christ's peace, a life that is in union with 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 tells us, no matter what the voices of the world tell us, that we are cherished, gifted, and called by God to live fruitful and meaningful lives.

Paul says to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. The word Paul uses means something like "umpire" or "referee." Christ's peace is a kind of referee, or we might say, counselor, 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. When we find ourselves filled with anger or fear, we go to Christ's peace. We simply let that peace shine on our anger or fear, relieving it, calming it, not driving it away, not turning our inner life into a battlefield. It is allowing the peace of our relationship with God, to speak to our anger, fear, or anxieties, to embrace them and calm them.

We cultivate and nurture this peace in ourselves through our commitment to a consistent inward journey. If we set aside at least one time each day to quiet ourselves, to pray, to breathe, to reflect non-judgmentally on what is going on inside us, to look more deeply into experiences and relationships, then we will find ourselves, little by little, living more peacefully. I like to think of the inward journey as the way we put God's grace into practice. It is the way we practice the peace of Christ.

We cannot, however, find and maintain this peace alone and by ourselves. We need a community devoted to the practice of Christ's peace. 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." The one body is the community. The call to Christ's peace is sounded in the community, where that peace is sustained and nurtured. The peace of Christ is embodied and nourished in community.

Jesus called together disciples to do the work of the kingdom of God. But they were also called to be together in a different way. The church is a community of those who live 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 learned and practiced, that the stranger is welcomed, that we are reminded of who we really are when we become lost in guilt or fear or self-condemnation. It is in community that we are called again to hope when we feel hopeless. It is in community that the vision of God's kingdom is lifted up for us when our vision becomes too small and narrow, when we lose sight of a world transformed in God's love, peace, and justice.

This is why the Church of the Covenant has always understood the church more in terms of community

than a religious organization or institution. The peace of Christ is found and sustained in a community of persons committed to one another in love and in ministry, and to their own spiritual practice and growth. The community offers a kind of solidity as each of us works daily with our own spiritual lives, through disciplines that ground us 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 uncentered, trapped in and projecting our own ego-centeredness. 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.

Paul now writes: "Let the word [about] Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom...." As a community, we center our life in the "word about Christ". The life, the teachings, the death and resurrection, the spirit of Jesus live at the center of our life together. This "word" (*logos*) of or about Christ is the living, dynamic word of God's love and will for our lives, which we experience and learn as we follow Jesus. It is the "word become flesh" in Jesus, which we contemplate and celebrate during this season of Christmas. Just as God's word "dwelt" fully in Jesus, so that word can dwell fully and richly in us and our life together. Again there is the passive sense. We are to "let" that word dwell richly in us, simply allow it to live in and among us. We make room for the life-giving word about Jesus to dwell in us through the ways we center our lives and our life together in him. We do this in practical, concrete ways, through study, prayer, reflection, sharing and worshiping together around the meaning of Jesus' life for us.

We are to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, says Paul. This points to what we call in our community "accountability". We cannot really deepen and grow in our lives of faith all by ourselves. We need a community of others who are on the same journey, working with the same commitments and spiritual practices, or disciplines, and struggling with the same challenges. We need others to remind us of and help us keep focused on this life to which we have been called. Each of us who make this commitment need to be in a relationship of accountability. We need to create for ourselves opportunities for sharing how we are doing, where we feel we are growing and where we feel stuck. This needs to be part of each mission group, a time set aside for each member to share in depth how she or he is doing, where there is growth and where there is struggle. If we are not in a mission group, we need to meet with someone on a regular basis for such spiritual reporting and sharing. Accountability is not about policing each other in a legalistic way. It is about encouragement, support, and reminding each other of our commitments and their importance. We do this "in all wisdom," as Paul says. That means, I think, with a sensitivity to and respect for one another, and with awareness that each person belongs to God, not to us.

As we begin a new calendar year, I am conscious of and grateful for our being a community that is committed to letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and the word about Christ dwell richly in and among us. I need such a community in order to be and become who God made me to be. I need to be reminded of what really matters, of what is most important for my life. I need help in order to remain grounded in gratitude, thankful in everything I do or say, as Paul wrote.

However, it is not just about my own need for such a community. Our world needs communities that are working with, growing in, and living out the life of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love, and peace. Many years ago I first began taking time for extended retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, then later at the Sisters of Loretto, both communities in Kentucky, where we then lived. I remember the feeling I had as I would leave at the end of my retreat time. It was a profound gratitude for these communities of intentional peace and love, communities where people took seriously their lives as gifts from God to be given to and for the world. These communities provided for me a source of strength, hope, encouragement, and the reminder of what life is truly about. Such communities, I remember thinking, exist for the sake of the world. This is what we here have been called to offer other people, our city, and the world. We need to be aware and thankful that our life together is not only for our own sakes, which is very important, but also for the sake of the world which God created and loves eternally.