

### **A Community of Christ's Peace**

John 20:19-23 *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit...."*

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 as a religion, or the Jewish people as a whole. He is talking about the religious power structure that conspired to do away with Jesus because he was felt to be 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 point John makes is that the disciples are afraid of a world that is hostile to the way of life they have learned in Jesus. Their leader has been killed. Their association with him has put them in danger. So they are in hiding because they are afraid.

In some incomprehensible yet real way, Jesus is with them, just as he is present with us still when we gather and strive to live as his followers. His first words are: Peace be with you! In the midst of the things that scare us, whether outside or inside us, in the midst of human society that gets so lost in violence, greed, and hatred, in the midst of the challenges of following 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 the challenges or pains of life. It does not pretend that everything is okay. 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. It is both Jesus' gift and his command to us. But Jesus, you don't understand! Look at what I am going through, how people have treated me, all my disappointments and losses. Don't you see what a mess the world is in, how many people are suffering and how much violence and injustice there is? How can you say, Peace be with you? Let me get through this struggle. Let the world become less violent and unjust. Then I will be at peace. We always attach being at peace to outward circumstances. When this or that happens, then my life will be peaceful. And we tend to act as though Jesus doesn't really know how hard life can be, that maybe Jesus thinks the life of discipleship is a walk in the park. But then Jesus shows us his hands and his side, the torture and death wounds dealt by the world we think he doesn't understand. Jesus, who experienced all the suffering there can be in life, still commands us as his followers and his community: Peace be with you. Be at peace within and among yourselves.

Being at peace is hard. There is so 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 or anger, 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. What do our fears, worries, anger, even righteous anger, accomplish? Nothing. We only add to the troubles and stress and confusion of life.

Being at peace takes spiritual work, growing in 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 lash out at others out of our anger and upset. We continue to fuel our fear or hostility with self-justifications. We forget 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, this gentle command, from Jesus: Peace be with you! It is not that we don't experience fear or worry or anxiousness as people of faith. It is just that we can, in the peace Jesus is talking about, not let them control us. It is simple, but not easy. It takes practice.

This is why the inward journey, the life of prayer in its fullest sense, is so critical. 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 Jesus is talking about. To make this a regular, daily practice is difficult at first. We are still running from our fears. We are still blaming others or the world for our anger. 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. We grow in our understanding of what makes us “tick,” and with understanding comes acceptance, and with acceptance can come change. It is all about working with Jesus’ call to be at peace.

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. We have more than enough religious communities that are aggressively seeking to extend their power and influence over others, engaging in spiritual domination or abuse. 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 spiritual practice seriously. It was the point at which I stopped running from my fears, anxiousness, and anger. As I drove away from Gethsemani after three days of silence, I felt a profound gratitude for that community. It was not a community without tensions and conflicts. Merton’s writings about life there tell us that. Yet it was a community devoted to living in the peace Jesus commands us to have, a peace within a world that is tumultuous, lost in confused values and directions. It was like an anchor for the world, or a wellspring of spiritual sanity and clarity.

You don't need to be a monastic community, however, to live in and out of the peace of Christ. The Church of the Covenant has felt called to be such a community. People come here for worship or to walk the grounds or to spend time in retreat, and say such things as, “This is such a peaceful place.” I think it is true. We try to create places--in our mission groups, and in the missions with which we work--where people can touch the peace of Christ, the peace of God, places where we can more clearly touch the sacred dimension of our lives.

Yet it can be this way only as we continue to 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. Our mission groups need to continue to commit to spiritual practices that ground the group in peace, as well as in the vision to which it feels called. We may not do it perfectly, but 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. The sins you forgive are forgiven; the sins you do not forgive are not forgiven. This may trouble us. Aren't we always to practice forgiveness? That's what one of the disciplines for Community and Covenant Members says: Strive to be a channel of God's forgiveness and love in every relationship. I don't think we need to get too hung up over what Jesus means by "retaining" or not forgiving sins. In essence, Jesus is giving his community authority and power to continue his ministry which he has from God. The breath he breathes on the disciples is the breath of ministry. 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.

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 gives life to 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 connects us with God's spirit. Breathing in the spirit of God, the breath of Jesus, we can then we breathe out our fears. And the spirit of ministry that Jesus breathes into us makes our lives channels of God's redemptive love for the world. Breathing in, breathing out. This is a good image for the life of faith as Jesus' community.