

May 9, 2010/Sixth Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

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”

As Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure and death, he promises that the Holy Spirit will be with them, continuing to teach them and remind them of his words. He gives them his peace, a peace they cannot derive from the world around them, a world in turmoil and confused about what really matters. And he tells them to keep their hearts untroubled, and not to be afraid.

The Holy Spirit is God’s energizing, teaching, and leading presence with us. God’s spirit keeps us grounded in Jesus’ teachings, and deepens our understanding of the life to which Jesus calls us. Just before our reading for 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 commit ourselves to the life of following Jesus, we begin to realize we are not alone. Jesus describes God's spirit as an advocate--on our side as a helper, strengthener, comforter, and encourager. God’s spirit is with us as we work with the practices of prayer, study, worship, giving, mission, the specific and concrete ways we live as Jesus' community. 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 did not part the waters of the Red Sea until the first Israelite jumped in. It is as we move out in faith that we are met with 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 empowers us.

Not only will you have God's own spirit helping you in the life of faith and reminding you of my words, says Jesus. I also give you my peace. Jesus gives his disciples what they need most. Jesus knew that the life to which he called his disciples was contrary to just about everything around them—the “world.” Now, the “world” in John’s gospel does not mean God's good creation. The “world” refers to the persons, structures, values, and forces that are 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 has no clue what Jesus is talking about. They are from two different worlds. Pilate thrives in the world of power politics, coercion and getting one’s way with violence. It is the one dimensional world of egotism and self-centeredness. Jesus is about servanthood, giving oneself for the sake of life. One world skims the surface layer of existence and falls for every kind of illusion. The other world knows the deepest 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, unless we harmonize our lives with the movement of God’s loving purposes.

As part of Jesus' community, our lives, too, are not from this world but have that different, deeper source. This does not mean that we are detached from the everyday concerns and needs of this earth and its people. Far from it. Later in Chapter 17 of John’s gospel, Jesus prays that God will 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 to live as those who love God, one another, and the world as God's creation. The world into which we are sent is precisely the world that is messed up, hurting, full of violence and confusion. It is what we often call the "real" world, when in actuality it is the "unreal" world, the world alienated from its true nature and identity. The movement of faith is not an escape from but a mission into a hurting, alienated world. Following this movement of faith into the world, however, does not mean that we go as though into enemy territory, with arrogant and combative spirits, meeting anger with anger, violence with violence. We go with compassion, 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, accompanies us with encouragement, guidance, insight, and power.

Living as those whose kingdom is not from this world is difficult. Receiving the peace Jesus gives us is not easy for us. We need to become aware of how our own hearts and minds have bought into the illusions that are all around us. We need to acknowledge the violence in our own hearts, the arrogance of our own spirit, and the disregard and disconnection with which we walk upon this earth, the creation. The easy path would be avoidance of these struggles in our own spirits. The easy path would be withdrawal into a religion of escape or of outright partnership with the "world" that John's gospel is talking about. When religion buys into success, self-righteousness, affluence, and self-preservation, it has joined the "world". Jesus calls us to the difficult path, the narrow gate that leads to living in one world as those who belong to the other, true world. In all of this, we are to be a people of the peace Jesus gives. Peace with ourselves. Peace with one another. Peace toward the world.

Jesus gives us his peace so that our hearts will not be troubled and we will not be afraid. Living faithfully in the world can bring loads of 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 or profoundly discouraged. Jesus' peace, however, gives us a center that will hold amidst all that we face and experience. Howard Thurman, 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--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. That is why the inward journey is so important, and it is the part of the life of faith that we resist the most. Why? Partly because we tend to be activists, giving lip service to the life of prayer when we are really convinced we know what is best for the world. Partly because the inward journey is the most difficult; it is where we are working with our own lives. Here lies the importance of the discipline of Covenant and Community Membership that speaks of practicing prayer on a daily basis, setting aside the time needed for this purpose. We do it not only for ourselves, but for the sake of the world. If we are not at peace within ourselves and among ourselves, if we are filled with fear and anxiousness, then we bring nothing that is truly helpful to the world. We only add to the anger, fear, and anxiety around us.

We could say that the inward journey is the practice of receiving the peace Jesus gives us. This peace is not a withdrawal from life. It is the doorway to knowing where our lives come from and knowing clearly what it is we are called to give and to do for the life of God's world. Receiving Christ's peace and dwelling in that peace means being anchored more and more in the present. To be present to ourselves, to our relationships, to the world around us, to God. 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. Jesus 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 can receive Christ's gift of peace.

I once attended a family session for persons in an addiction recovery program. A friend who had no family invited me to be his family. 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 my friend, I was deeply struck at how life-saving is the capacity to come back to the present, to live fully in the present. 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 manipulations, the tendencies to always blame the world or other people—none of these things had any effect on the addiction and were in fact its symptoms. 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 the world around us, a peace that we seek but ultimately receive as a gift within ourselves.

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 Jesus 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 fulfillment. And it is only in the clarity of the peace Jesus gives us that we can discern who we really are and are created to be, and what God is calling us to do for and give to the world.