

Peace as the World Can't Give

A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 15, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 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. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe." (John 14:23-29, NRSV)

Have you ever known someone ... do you know someone ... who exudes such peace and joy, that whenever you're around them, you feel refreshed and strengthened? I have known many such saints – precious lives which draw me out of myself and re-awaken in me a longing for something deeper in my life, for something *more*.

But such people don't just pop into being out of nothing. No one is just born that way. The first disciples of Jesus certainly weren't. And I for one, find that reassuring. There's hope for me yet. And there's hope for you too.

Our gospel text this morning recalls one of those times in which the disciples are challenged to grow beyond their preconceptions and limited expectations ... to grow *into* the people God knew they could be. They would have to grow because things were about to change: for on this night, Jesus was saying goodbye.

He washed their feet. He foretold his betrayal. He told them, cryptically, that "Where I am going you cannot come." The disciples had many anxious questions for him, but Jesus' answers were hard to understand. To them, it all sounded like their world was about to be turned upside down.

Oh, and by the way, Jesus says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled, and don't let them be afraid." Is he kidding? How are they supposed to carry on? What does he expect to happen?

A lot going on around us *today* may make *us* feel like Jesus has left the building, with no forwarding address. This is one of the many reasons I treasure the Bible as I do – because those men and women featured there are not so different from us ... and we are not so different from them. And their questions are ours – and ours, theirs.

Don't let your hearts be troubled? Why shouldn't they be troubled?

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you?" What peace could he be talking about?

What peace could he be talking about – with all the anxiety over the coronavirus ... the lingering spectre of terrorism ... the ongoing epidemic of gun violence ... the sadly cartoonish nature of our political theater ... and the burdens each of us carry that break our hearts in two, but seldom share ...

Where is this peace that Jesus talks about? Peace is exactly what it feels like we're missing right now. After all, if Jesus were so serious about his “peace”, wouldn't it mean that all this would stop? Wouldn't it mean the end of all this madness, the end of all our waiting and wanting and worrying?

No, the truth is, that Jesus knows and understands their questions. He is not ignoring their feelings. But the answer to their anxiety, fear, trouble is the peace which he alone can give, and not “peace” as the world offers it: “I do not give to you as the world gives.” But what does that mean?

I wonder. Don't we usually think of peace as the *absence* of something negative – the absence of war, or strife, or fear, or anger? We who yearn for peace usually yearn for it in these terms ... as the end of conflict, the end of war, the cessation of trouble, the calming of inner or outer storms. We want the chaos to end. But what if the peace of which Jesus speaks is something else?

There is an old Zen story about a man who came to see the Buddha because he had heard that the Buddha was a great teacher. Like all of us, he had some problems in his life, and he thought the Buddha might be able to help him straighten them out. He told the Buddha that he was a farmer. “I like farming,” he said, “but sometimes it doesn't rain enough, and my crops fail. Last year we nearly starved. And sometimes it rains too much, so my yields aren't what I'd like them to be.” The Buddha patiently listened to the man.

“I'm married, too,” said the man. “She's a good wife ... I love her, in fact. But sometimes she nags me too much, and I get tired of it.” The Buddha listened quietly.

“I have kids,” said the man. “Good kids, too ... but sometimes they don't show me enough respect. And sometimes ...” The man went on like this, laying out all his difficulties and worries. Finally, he wound down and waited for the Buddha to say the words that would put everything right for him. And the Buddha looked at the man intently and said, “I can't help you.”

“What do you mean?” said the man, astonished.

“Everybody's got problems,” said the Buddha. “In fact, we've all got *eighty-three* problems, each one of us. Eighty-three problems, and there's nothing you can do about it. If you work really hard on one of them, maybe you can fix it – but if you do, another one will pop right into its place. For example, you're going to lose your loved ones eventually. And you're going to die someday. Now there's a problem, and there's nothing you, or I, or anyone else can do about it.”

The man became furious. "I thought you were a great teacher!" he shouted. "I thought you could help me! What good is your teaching, then?"

The Buddha said, "Well, maybe it will help you with the *eighty-fourth* problem."

"The *eighty-fourth* problem?!" exclaimed the man. "What's the *eighty-fourth* problem?!"

The Buddha responded, "That you want not to have any problems."

What if the peace that is offered to us isn't an *absence* of something, but instead the *presence* of something? Maybe peace is *something*, all on its own. Maybe it is known not in the cessation of our trials, but in the *midst* of them – as the waves and the winds roar about us.

I go back to those saints I have known, and to those saints I know today. As I reflect on each and all of them, what they have in common is hardly a tranquil life, free of all conflict. It is not that all their prayers are answered quickly and positively, or that everything always works out for them and on time. In fact, the truth is, that what they all have in common is the cup of suffering, of struggle with inner or outer turmoil. They have been too chastened by life to labor under the delusion that they possess God. But in this non-possession, they have discovered a peace in the midst of their struggles. And that peace gives them courage to reach out in love.

Their deep faith doesn't take away the difficult things in their lives. It just keeps these things from having mastery over them, from limiting who they are and the possibilities around them. Their lives are witness to the truth that our needs, wants, and broken places are all still real, but they need not define us. We are more than what's missing.

In these times of anxiety, the world about us and fears within us would have us withdraw into shells of self-concern, but Jesus would have us get over ourselves and, guided by both compassion and wisdom, look out to the needs of our neighbors. There are so many vulnerable people out there – and they need us, now more than ever.

And in such acts of love and service, we too can experience this peace which Jesus offers. He offers it in the midst of that which swirls about us, that we might share that peace and blessing with others.

Jesus is not promising us an end to our problems; nor is he inviting us to ignore them. Rather, he promises something that the world cannot give ... the very presence of God which, in faith, quietly transforms all it touches.

May we be so transformed, and may we be agents of that transformation in those places God has placed us – to the glory of God!

Amen.