

May 3, 2016



"Christian Basics: Finding Peace at the Center of Our Lives"

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

John 14:23-29

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.

Our Christian Basics sermon series for this Eastertide season continues this morning with a brief reflection on the building block of faith which may just be the most basic and essential of all: the peace of Christ. In fact, it is the keystone, that is, in architectural terms, the wedge-shaped stone at the center top, the matrix of a masonry arch that locks all the other stones in place. The keystone is the final piece placed during construction that locks the arch in place and allows the entire structure to bear weight.

The peace of Christ is for us that very keystone that holds the whole structure of life and faith together and makes it possible to bear the weight of anything that would make us anxious or fearful.

The words we hear Jesus speak this morning come from what is called his "Farewell Discourse," his farewell speech to his disciples on the last night he is with them all, before leaving to go into Jerusalem where he will meet his death. Try to imagine that moment. Surely the disciples were anxious and afraid that night. Beset by threats of violence from the Roman soldiers, and vulnerable to acts of abandonment and betrayal from within their own company. They were no doubt disoriented and already grieving the loss of the teacher and friend.

Jesus knows. He loves them dearly. He is their Good Shepherd. And so, in the midst of it all, to comfort them, to heal them, to assure them, he gives them this incredible, unexpected, almost unimaginable gift: peace. "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."

Scholars point out that the Greek word used here which we translate as "give" actually means something closer to "bequeath." At this tender moment, just prior to his death, Jesus bequeaths his peace to his followers. He bestows peace upon them, grants peace to them, commits peace to them, entrusts peace to them. Peace is the legacy he leaves with those who love him. It is his lasting will and testament.

His peace. The peace that comes from God. The peace that passes all understanding. He gives it to his first disciples on his last night with them and then when he appears to them after his resurrection, as our Risen Lord, he greets them saying: "Peace be to you!" He anoints them with peace, a peace that imparts unto them all the benefits of resurrection life even as they face into their deepest fears. This is the peace with which Christ blesses us.

But why did he say: "not as the world gives..."? Jesus wanted to clearly distinguish between God's peace and what passed for peace in the world as they knew it. In the midst of the Roman Empire, peace meant the absence of war. It was the "Pax Romana," imposed and enforced by the sword. It was oppressive and coercive. It kept things quiet, which meant keeping the Jewish people and other conquered people in their place. It was the so-called "peace" that would in fact crucify him to keep order. To silence him, and in their thinking, to end this troublesome uprising.

That's not at all what I mean, Jesus was trying to say. My peace is not as the world gives. The peace I bequeath to you is God's peace, shalom.

Shalom cannot be defined narrowly as the absence of war. Shalom is the fullness of life, for all. *Shalom* pertains to the individual, the community, and the web of relationships in which each person lives. It is the condition of wholeness, of complete welfare that encompasses the whole person. It is the "peace on earth" which the angels proclaimed at Jesus' birth. God's shalom is a state of wholeness and security, universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight, for us and for all creation.

It is the Apostle Paul, writing in the letter to the Philippians, who teaches us how to understand Christ's gift of peace. It comes from God who is the God of peace, as Paul says. It is the very nature and essence of the God who gives us life and whose precepts we are to follow.

Paul promises that this peace will *stand guard*, using a military expression, that this peace will stand guard over our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, guarding what enters in and shielding us from anxiety. It's the way our Good Shepherd guards our going out and our coming in.

John Calvin commented on this saying: "[Paul] is right to call this "the peace of God" inasmuch as it does not depend on the present aspect of things, and does not bend itself to the various shiftings of the world, but is founded on the firm and immutable word of God. He is right also, to speak of it as surpassing all understanding or perception, for nothing is more foreign to the human mind than to hope even in the depth of despair, in the depth of poverty to see riches, and in the depth of weakness not to give way...and all this in the grace of God alone, which is itself only known through the Word and the inward earnest of the Spirit."

This is the peace of God deeply rooted in the God of peace. And therein lies the greatest challenge and invitation for us, we who are rooted and grounded not only in that God of peace, but in the gods of anxiety and fear, the gods of violence and hate.

The question we all ask, I suppose, is "how do we get that peace?" Here's what Paul advises: be active in your faith life, he says. Don't be anxious, but fill your life with rejoicing, gentleness, kindness, good sense, with prayer and thanksgiving. "Be known for your consideration of others", one translation says. Another puts it this way: "Tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer that is full of gratitude."

And fill your minds, Paul says, with that which is true, honorable, just, pure, with whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious. And in so doing, the God of peace will be with you.

This peace comes to us as a gift. We are asked only to prepare our hearts and minds to receive it. We are asked choose peace and to practice each day the things that make for peace. For the great spiritual teacher, Henri Nouwen, we learn how to do this, we practice doing this, through a life of prayer. For it is in prayer, Nouwen says, that we learn how to live in God's house. We learn how to live in a different place.

For John Wesley, learning how to live in this different place that is God's house required of us disciplined lives of prayer, study of Scripture, service, and regular participation in worship and the sacraments. Actually, good Anglican priest that he was, Wesley wanted his Methodist people to participate in the Lord's Supper at least once a week, every Sunday. Wesley urged his followers to prepare carefully and faithfully to receive the Sacrament, starting with evening devotions on Thursday, continuing through one's prayers and devotions on Friday, Saturday and early Sunday morning before coming to receive. That's a lot of prayer! But that's the work Wesley thought we needed to make ready our hearts and minds and spirits to truly receive the fullness of Christ's love and peace.

Through the season of Eastertide, the Easter story continues to unfold as the truth and power of new Resurrection life to begin to dawn in our hearts and minds, to change us and set us free. And going forward, it takes a lifetime of prayer on our part to keep re-working our hearts in order to take it all in, to find that keystone that is the peace of Christ that holds the whole structure of life and faith together and makes it possible to bear the weight of anything that would make us anxious or fearful.

Every time we come to this table, every time we lift up our hearts to greet the Risen Lord, every time we hear him saying to us: "Peace be with you!", every time we taste this bread and drink from this cup, every time we feel his love embracing the best and the worst of who we are, every time his grace pours over us through this Sacrament, every time we know our sins to be forgiven, every time we catch a glimpse of the power of new life, every time he offers peace in the midst of questions and doubt...each and every time, our hearts get bigger, our minds become wiser, our faith goes deeper--for the peace of God is transforming us into those who live in a different place, who dwell in the house of the Lord and hear our Shepherd's voice, and know that we are loved and forgiven, called by name and cherished forever.