

Shalom! Peace be with you.

Such a great word, peace. Jesus greeted his disciples with words of peace just as he had left them. In John 14:27, Jesus said to his disciples and to us: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Who doesn't long, even ache, for some peace? Peace within our lives, free from overwhelming stress and troubles and frustrations. Peace for our communities, free from crime and poverty and exploitation. Peace for our world, free from political, religious and ethnic warfare. Peace.

We live in a world that is starved for peace. Clashes between countries, cultures, politics and religion have left the world with precious little peace. In the last three thousand years, it is estimated that there have only been about 270 years of global peace. Of 1,650 documented arms races, only 16 have not ended in war, and those only because of the total economic collapse of the participants. Over 8000 peace treaties have been signed, with an average effective period of just over two years. There has been little peace by human effort alone.¹

I wish that I could say that those few years of peace were brought about by followers of Christ, that the peace that Jesus left to the disciples has resulted in some peace within the world, that our Christian actions have had a measurable impact. But history seems to say otherwise. If anything, conflicts with such names as the Crusades, 100 Years War, 30 Years War and others suggest that religion might create additional conflicts. When a faith group comes to the not so humble conclusion it is right and the other side is wrong, so wrong that it puts the souls of its adherents at risk of eternal damnation, then war is justified, or so some would claim. Surely, this is not the peace that Jesus has left to us.

¹ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations : A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX : Bible Communications, 1996, c1979 Reference: According to the *Canadian Army Journal*, a former president of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, aided by historians from England, Egypt, Germany, and India came up with some fantastic figures and findings:

Perhaps this peace of Christ refers to the church. Surely, if there is to be peace somewhere, one ought to be able to find it within the church. But even Peter and Paul had disagreements. The early councils struggled to define what it meant to be a Christian and, therefore, what was beyond the bounds of Christianity. The Reformation addressed human failings within the church leadership. Protestantism renewed a focus on faith rather than ritual to the consternation of the status quo church. In modern times, the number of denominations, the splits and mergers and failed mergers continue to demonstrate that we have not found the universal answer for what a church ought to be. There has been little peace by humans acting for God.

Maybe the peace of Jesus is at the personal level. Martin Luther as a young monk disparately sought God, sought peace for his troubled soul. He spent tormented hours in prayer, even more in confession seeking to become good enough to earn peace with God. It became so extreme that Luther's priest allegedly told him to go get a life so that he would have something to confess. Even at a personal level, humans acting for God, trying to earn peace, fails.

In the Old Testament, Shalom or peace, was often used as a greeting, often used with a sense of security or prosperity. Perhaps Jesus was using "Peace be with you" as merely a polite greeting conveying a casual hope for the absence of conflict in life, or a contented life made easier with prosperity. Yet legend and history tell us that the disciples, along with oh so many early converts, died for their faith. The passage from 1st Peter this morning warns us that it will not be easy for those who follow Jesus: believers can expect to be "distressed by various trials." I believe that history has shown just how remarkable an understatement this is.

Yet Peter also puts us onto the path of understanding what this peace is about. Those trials lead to the proof of our faith, proof that comes in the form of our giving all praise and honor and glory to Christ. In the midst of our conflict, we proclaim our faith,

even though we have not seen Jesus, we still believe in Him and therefore “greatly rejoice with with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of our faith the salvation of our souls.”

For Martin Luther, it was discovering justification through faith in the book of Romans. Luther came to understand that he did not have to be good enough to earn God's peace. Rather, the gift of God's grace, the gift that freely justifies us through the work of Christ is all that it takes. The same faith that brings us together to worship the Lord is all that it takes to find peace, eternal peace. Peace that is a gift of God.

Before I go further into this idea of peace, I'd like to insert an advertisement for conflict. Without conflict, those trials that Peter warned us about, we are not forced to decide who we are, individually or collectively. Without conflict and trials, we are not confronted with defining what we believe, we would not fully grasp the extent of our own faith. Just as the body does not become stronger unless the muscles face the trial of exercise, our faith does not grow without exercise. Our faith grows when we turn to the power and promises of God when we are in the midst of conflict, when we realize that we can not get through the current challenges alone, without God.

All of the early church struggles sought to make sense of what Jesus accomplished, to explain holy mysteries in terms limited by our comprehension and language. As our understanding has increased, brought about through discussion and even conflict, we have become ever more conformed to the total Word of God in areas of racial equality, woman's role in church leadership; we have stripped out the modern ritual that replaced the ritual of the Pharisees. Yet, until we are fully transformed, have fully returned to the image of God in which we were created, free of sin, we will continue to have conflict. Hopefully, conflict that transforms rather than destroys.

I think that it is safe to say that the peace of Christ is neither a lack of conflict nor a promise of an easy and prosperous life as a casual or secular Shalom might indicate. A

fuller understanding of Shalom also conveys the idea of being complete, of being whole. Even more so, this wholeness is both a gift of God and a completeness with God. This Old Testament peace comes from living within the covenant that God made with Israel, the people of God.

Jesus further develops this concept of completeness and wholeness with God, a gift from God, throughout his ministry. When he declares at the Last Supper that he is the new covenant, that he offers forgiveness of sin, Jesus proclaims that we can have peace with God, a gift from God. In this act of forgiving, we are made whole, complete with God.

As the disciples gathered in the lonely darkness of that night, as they fearfully locked themselves into a room, the last thing they felt was peace. The authorities had put their leader to death; no doubt they would soon come looking for the disciples. Confusion, agitation, filled their minds as they sought to comprehend the empty tomb, the appearances of Jesus. I daresay that there was even a sense of anger with God for having been led astray, or so it seemed, left without jobs, penniless. They knew neither peace with the world, peace within themselves, nor peace with God.

And then Jesus walked through the door, the locked door, and said “Peace be with you!” Peace that comes from realizing that God has not left you alone. Peace that comes from confirmation of the resurrection stories. Peace that comes from realizing that Jesus, the resurrected Lord, can easily pass through any barriers of this world. Peace also that comes from seeing the wounds, understanding this new covenant sealed by his blood that allows us to freely receive the peace of completeness, wholeness with God.

Jesus still calls to his disciples, to us, with the greeting “Peace be with you!”

There is a story told of two painters, each of whom painted a picture to illustrate his concept of peace and rest. The first chose for his scene a still, lone lake among far-

off mountains. The second threw on his canvas a thundering waterfall, with a fragile birch tree bending over the foam; at the fork of a branch, almost wet with the cataract's spray, a robin sat on its nest. The first was only stagnation; the last was peace and rest. For in rest there are two elements—tranquility and energy; silence and turbulence; creation and destruction; fearfulness and fearlessness.

The peace of Jesus is like that robin's nest. The peace of Jesus is the place, the home we have when we become whole in Jesus, nestled within Christ's love. But the peace of Jesus is not static, not a place where we can rest forever amongst, but apart from, the foaming waters of the world around us. The peace of Jesus calls us to take our faith out into that world. In spite of history, we are called to be peacemakers. Yet we become peacemakers, not through human action, not by trying to do God's work for God, but by allowing God to work within the world, within us. We are called to seek both the absence of conflict but even more to share the peace the comes from being made whole by God.

When Jesus said “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.” He also said “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” This is the peace, the free gift of God: peaceful hearts without fear, having faith in God, letting God work in and through us. This is the peace that Jesus gives us.

Peace be with you!