

Nov 16      The Peace of Jesus

John 20:19-26

One of the essential concepts of Jesus' teaching ministry was that of peace. When I talk about peace I am not meaning the absence of conflict, though that can be part of what Jesus spoke about, but instead that deep calm assurance that comes to those who live and walk in faith. Our scripture lesson today talks about the first encounters the disciples had with Jesus as one risen from the dead. Three times he gives the blessing of peace. The first is when he greets them in the upper room on the night of Easter. They are frightened and do not know what they are seeing. After showing them his hands and feet so they know that it is Jesus who is with them he again says peace. One week later when he sees Thomas with all of his questions he again gives the blessing of peace. This shows how important this concept was to Jesus, especially after the resurrection. The Apostle Paul grasps this idea for he often talks about the "Peace of Christ" and offers, as well, the blessing of peace in his letters.

The writer of the book talks about four layers of peace that he believes are present when Jesus shares this blessing. Today I want us to examine them and realize that we, as people of faith, are to work at making sure all of these various elements of peace are present in our lives, our faith and our interactions with others.

We begin by learning that "Peace" is a greeting. The word "Shalom" means peace. This should remind us that in every situation and every encounter we should strive to share peace. So often we hear about the "rage" of another, whether it be on the road, in a store or at a restaurant, and the person who is angry wants to justify their feelings. We also let creep into our interactions pettiness of all kinds thinking it doesn't really matter. We carry the baggage of past interactions into the present to justify why we treat certain people the way we do. Jesus asks us to be at peace with people and we know that means treating them with kindness, with respect and with love, whether they return it or not! How much better the world would be if we just pretended to act peacefully in our relationships. I am not even saying we have to feel a particular way; just going through the motions would be a good thing. This is the first level of peace that we are called to embody as a follower of Christ.

Going deeper Jesus wants us to see that we can have a peace that replaces fear. When he first encountered the disciples they were filled with fear. Jesus, their beloved teacher had been arrested and crucified. Would they be next? The writer of the gospel lets us know their condition because he states they were behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Jesus offers peace when we are afraid. This peace fills us up. When Jesus gives his peace to us, we notice it leaving no place for fear to gain a foothold within. Now this doesn't mean that if we have enough faith Jesus will fix the problems. But instead it says that when we fully trust and let God's love fill us and renew us we find we have a sense of peace that no outward circumstances can shake.

The disciples, after a bit of time and an infilling of the Holy Spirit, found this peace and were then able to go and proclaim the good news of Jesus even in front of those leaders they feared. They could do it because they had gone down to that next layer.

We too are offered this peace. I have sat with people after hearing distressing news from the doctor. At first, fear of the unknown is forefront in their thoughts. This is normal. But often I have seen that fear replaced with a sense of peace and trust. They will say, "I don't know what the future holds but I know who holds the future." Sometimes those most fearful at first come to have a great sense of peace. They face surgeries and treatments and struggles with calmness appreciating the love and support of friends and of the church. We are offered peace that replaces fear if we let go of our need for control and instead trust in God's loving presence.

The third level is the peace that comes when we rely on the good news that God is with us. We need to celebrate that there is no door we can pass through that the abiding presence of God has not already entered. This awareness of God with them allowed the disciples to proclaim the good news in the face of tremendous odds. It has allowed the faithful over the centuries to face death with peace because they knew God was with them.

How many times have we, in the midst of a busy or fearful time said, “I just need a moment’s peace.” What we are really saying is “I just need a moment to remind myself that I am in God’s abiding presence, a moment to drink in God’s love, a moment to be folded into the arms of grace.” This peace comes when we let God fill up all the spaces where fear once reigned. It comes when we rely upon God.

It is awesome to see this peace in action. I have shared this story before but it made such an impact on me that whenever I think of the power of peace to sustain us I recall the young woman in my first church. She had fled an abusive marriage, lived on the verge of poverty for some time raising her two children, finally finding a stable, kind man with which to build a new life together. They had saved for and built their dream home. Because of a design error in the chimney within a few weeks of moving in there was a fire and it burned the house almost to the ground. Nothing was salvageable. We went to see her and I recall her standing in the ashes. Looking around at the ruined state of things she hugged her kids and said, “I have been through worse and God, my church, and my friends were with me. I trust that they will be with me now.” She had a trust and sense of peace. That calmness extended to everyone else. It took time but through love, help and insurance they were able to begin anew.

Finally, Jesus reminded the disciples and he reminds us that this Peace is not just to keep and hold, but is to be given away. We have a mission to help others replace fear with trust and to remind them that God is with them. Not always will our words be accepted. Sometimes they will be scorned and rejected. But when we can live with that deep peace and trust and extend it to others, it changes the picture. Just as that mom, standing in her still smoldering ruins, gave her husband and kids some grounding to help them to look to the future in hope, so our peace can cause others to find peace themselves or at least seek for it.

In closing I would like to share about a woman who embodied these elements of fear. Her husband died unexpectedly of a heart attack. The first days were filled with grief and fear. She wasn’t sure how she would get along financially. The grown children were less comfort and more of a problem at this time as they, in their grief, kept demanding time from her. They wanted mom to help them with their concerns. No one

was listening to her, helping her, and life was tough. Then her sister arrived. I had never met her before but all of the family talked about Jane. She was a formidable presence who had suffered through several personal tragedies of her own. She was known for speaking her mind and often ruffling the feathers of others' emotions. I was therefore a bit uneasy when I got the call to come over to the house to plan the memorial service because Jane had some ideas. What I encountered was amazing. There was a sense of peace in that house that had not been present before. Jane, upon arriving, first of all figured out the problem with the kids. She told them in no uncertain words to quit bugging mom and if they had questions or problems to talk to her. Those words were not initially taken well, as you can imagine, but then a sense of peace came as all felt here was someone in charge. Her sister's fears began to diminish as well because Jane had been through the loss of a husband, had struggled financially, and so when Jane said that things would be all right, she was believable. And Jane was a woman of faith who kept reminding them that God was with them and would help them get through this time. And Jane's word for me was a reminder that this service needed to be positive and not fear based, which I agreed to. And as Jane was leaving after a couple of weeks she reminded her sister that she was there for her but also that she needed to reach out to others in need. That was how she was going to find healing. This she did and she became a person of peace for others.

Peace, it is more than a greeting, but a well of great joy where fear is replaced with trust, where we know God is with us. We find peace in knowing that there is no door we are walking through that God hasn't already walked through before us and in that awareness we find contentment and the courage to share our faith and peace with others. May it be so.