

Sermon for May 1, 2016 – “Peace”

6th Sunday of Easter, Year C – Text: Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

A Sunday school teacher was talking about the end of time, about Heaven and the Kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem. She told her class of youngsters about the “crowns of glory” that await people who believe. “Now tell me,” she said at the close of the lesson, “Who will get the biggest crown?” There was a silence for a moment; then one bright youngster said: “The one who has the biggest head.”

Today’s gospel reading is set at the time of the Last Supper, the night before Jesus gives Himself over to death for our sakes. In it Jesus tells His disciples that they should not grieve or sorrow over His going from them, that before He left, He would not only send them His Spirit to teach and comfort them. He would leave them His peace. Hear His words again: **“My peace I leave with you – My peace I give to you.” “I do not give to you as the world gives.”** What wonderful words. What a wonderful promise. This promise of Christ’s peace. But what do we make of that last phrase...The one that says: **“I do not give to you as the world gives.”** What does that mean? More to the point, what do they mean, for us?

Our call to worship this morning began with the words, “the Peace of Christ be with you.” You responded: “and also with you.” But, what is this peace that Christ gives, that we pray about for one another? What is the peace that He gives, unlike that which the world gives? There’s a story told about peace that may help answer that question.

It seems that one day an artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought, the artist painted a beautiful country scene. There were green fields with cows standing in them, birds were flying in the blue sky and a lovely little village lay in a distant valley. The artist gave the picture to the man but there was a look of disappointment on the patron’s face. The man said to the artist, “This isn’t a picture of true peace. It isn’t right. Go back and try again.” The artist went back to his studio, thought for several hours about peace, then went to his canvas and began to paint. When finished, there on the canvas was a beautiful picture of a mother. A mother holding a sleeping baby in her arms, smiling lovingly at the child. He thought, surely, this is true peace and he hurried to give the picture to the wealthy man. But, again, the wealthy man refused the painting and asked the painter to try again. The artist returned again to his studio. He was discouraged, tired and disappointed. He prayed for inspiration to paint a picture of true peace. Then, suddenly an idea came. The artist rushed to the canvas and began to paint like never before. When he finished, he hurried to give the wealthy man the painting. As he studied it carefully for several minutes, the artist held his breath. Then the wealthy man said, “Now this is a picture of true peace.” He accepted the painting, paid the artist and everyone was happy. The painting is entitled “Peace in the Midst of the Storm”. The artist is Jack E. Dawson. I would strongly advise going on line to take a look at the painting, it shows a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. It really captures the wind’s fury, the storm’s violence and power and in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, is a small bird. The bird is safe and dry in her nest snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird is at peace midst the storm that raged about her.

This seems to be portion of the picture of peace that Jesus gives. Not a worldly kind of peace, not the peace of the serenity in nature. Not the peace of a mother and child. Not the peace of an absence of conflict but rather a peace of knowing that in the midst of turmoil there’s a rock which can shelter us, a place where we’re nurtured, where we find that we can move into the future without fear. Where we find a power that can spread its wings over us and keep us safe. As an old hymn puts it as it contemplates the storms of life:

“We have an anchor that will not move...“Grounded firm and deep in the savior’s love...”

So many of us look for peace in this world. We look for the safe places where there is nothing that can disturb us. We look for the quieting of our hearts, hearts disturbed so often by fear and anxiety. We look for assurance. We seek things like hope, and joy, and these are good things to do. Many of us pray about peace, not just about peace for ourselves, not just inside our hearts, our families and our church but in and for our world. For an end to war and acts of terrorism. An end to all the shootings in public places. An end for the violence that nations and individuals do to one another. Indeed, these are good things! But it seems that we often look for peace, even pray for peace, in ways that aren't helpful. We look and pray for peace with an understanding of peace as simply an end to those things that disturb or frighten us. As an absence of turmoil or conflict. But it seems that we often forget that the lack of peace in our hearts and in our world is merely a symptom, part of a larger problem, not the disease itself.

In Hebrew, peace – Shalom – is much more than the absence of things that disturb us. Peace is linked to the concept of wholeness, of being “at one” with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Of having not only an absence of war but of having the **causes** of war eliminated; things like greed, hate, fear, injustice, intolerance, and prejudice. Of having not only an absence of pain and distress but of having the disease that causes the pain and distress cured. This is what Jesus was about when He walked among us. This is part of what Jesus was talking about when He said: **“My 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.”** Jesus was, and is, The One who heals the disease rather than one who simply masks the symptoms. Jesus was, and is, the one who makes all things new. He is creating a new world, a new heaven and a new earth rather than simply trying to fix the old one.

Friends, we have a vision. A vision to guide our walking and provide assurance as we walk. We have a destination and a goal. A purpose and a plan. What's more, we have one, who's able to deliver on His promise, One who's able to bring about a new world. We know this for two reasons; the first is that what's been promised in the past has been fulfilled, all the prophecies have come true. The second reason is that we're witnesses to this. We've seen prayers answered, lives transformed. We've experienced new mercies every morning. But more than a destination that provides us direction, more than a vision that provides us hope, more than a goal that keeps us busy, we have a presence here and now. A presence that comforts us and helps us to know peace, and to share that peace, each and every day. A presence that reminds us that God's Word is effective. It does not return empty. It does what it sets out to do, and what it does is work toward wholeness. That presence is the presence of Christ himself. The presence of the Spirit. The presence of God.

That's part of what Jesus means when he says: **“My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”** He doesn't give as the world gives because what he gives is effective; it actually works! What he gives is eternal. It cannot and will not fail. Jesus gives us peace with God through His love, through His life and death, through His resurrection. He gives us a new world, sharing with us God's eternal plan. And this goes beyond even the picture of the artist that I mentioned earlier, the picture of the bird sitting safely on its nest in the midst of a violent storm.

We're reminded of this kind of thing throughout the Bible when we read about the great promises made by God through his prophets. Promises of freedom. Promises of a deliverer. Speaking to Moses, God said: **“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt... I have heard their cry...” “Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”** How God spoke to Israel when the exiled nation was in captivity through Isaiah, God called the people to **“remember no more the things of the past,**

for behold I do a new thing.” “The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer...” “My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” Promises made. Promises kept. That is what God does!

It's been noted frequently that we are, in fact, in the same position today as the people of Israel were then. We're in captivity, a spiritual captivity, one that tempts us to cling to the past and to complain about the present instead of moving into the future with confidence. What would it be like, if instead of complaining about things aren't perfect here in the church or, for that matter, at home, or work, we instead claimed the promises of God and praised God for all the good things that He's doing in our midst even now? Or instead of getting agitated about how few people helped out when asked to help out, we got excited about how many people help out all the time, often without being asked? Or instead of complaining about all the bad news that we can so easily complain about, we spoke of the good things that God is doing in lives all around us all the time. What would it be like, what would our church and eventually our whole community be like, if instead of sweating about all the little stuff that goes wrong, we really got hold of the promises of God? What if we looked to the light instead of the darkness? What if we starting taking delight in all the little stuff that goes right, individually and as a church, seeing them as signs of God's faithfulness towards us and towards the world He's made? An interesting set of questions, no? Interesting because that is exactly what we, as those who claim to be God's people, are called to do. Interesting because they remind us that there are more enduring things than the pain we experience, more important things to do than simply dwell on the past or moan about what we lack or what isn't going well. We have things to bring healing and wholeness to our own lives and those around us, things that bring glory of God.

As Jesus said at the beginning of his ministry: **“behold, the kingdom of God is at hand.” “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”**

Peace is found in living a life of faith. It's found in following Christ, in walking according to His words and bearing witness in all we say and do. It's found in the living God and in His everlasting love. We've a vision, we've a goal. What's more, we've a God able to accomplish all that He purposes. A God who's conquered death, who has opened the way to eternal life to all. A God who serves where others would rule, and rules where no one and nothing can.

Friends, it's no secret that the world's in turmoil. We're aware of the great storm raging all around us but I'd invite you to look to the good that is, in fact, all around us. I invite you to be a part of that good, as Jesus Himself calls us to do in today's gospel, by keeping His word. Do it knowing that this word will not return to us or God empty, but will accomplish everything it's meant to accomplish. The peace of Christ isn't simply a peace of huddling on the nest while the storm rages, it's a peace of knowing that when the storm's over it's over forever, and all of creation will be at peace. As the scripture says, **“grief may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”** Jesus' words concerning His peace are comforting but not easy.

While often elusive, it's a peace that lasts, a peace that triumphs, a peace that heals and makes us whole. It's not something the world can give. It can only come to us from God in Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.