

Easter 6C (5/1/2016)
Acts 16:9-15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
John 14:23-29

The world does not offer peace, at least not lasting peace. The peace of God is liberating and enduring, a deep-seated sense of well-being that mitigates the anxieties that creep into our minds. We receive God's peace as a gift, and once we've internalized it, we can become it for others.

It's no accident that the passing of the peace follows immediately after the prayers of intercession. Every Sunday, we stand and speak aloud our petitions on behalf of the church, the world, and all those who suffer, concluding each plea with a reference to God's promise of mercy: "Hear us, O God. Your mercy is great." When we feel powerless to address the world's countless needs – when we feel powerless over even the circumstances of our own lives – we pray. Even though there is no guarantee that our prayers will be answered in the ways we hope, we pray. We pray because we recognize that if it's all up to us, then we're in a world of hurt. So, we hand our lives and the lives of others over to God; we relinquish control over outcomes that are beyond our power. "We deliver all this into *your* care, O God, trusting in the work of your Holy Spirit...."¹

And once we've prayed, we offer each other a sign of Christ's peace. It's as though our prayers have prepared us to receive this peace and to share it with each other. When we loosen our grip on life, when we lay our burdens at

¹ Sunday, May 1, 2016: <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#texts>.

God's feet, we are suddenly free to accept a word of promise. In the face of all the stress and struggle and grief, we hear "the peace of Christ be with you always." And, to this we respond, "and also with you." This is no small moment. When we pass the peace, we echo Jesus' own words: "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."

It's easy to take this statement for granted until we remember its context. Our Gospel from John today is an excerpt from Jesus' farewell discourse, his last words to the disciples before he faces the terror of the cross. If you've ever experienced or even dared to contemplate the unexpected and violent death of a loved one, then you have a sense of the disciples' state of mind. Jesus' friends are surely dreading his departure, and anxious about their own future without him. Will they suffer and die, too? Where will they turn for guidance and inspiration? Will they be strong enough to stick together? Yet, **in the midst of that anxiety, Jesus offers them a divine gift: *peace* – the kind the world cannot give, the kind that sets their hearts at rest.**

The world, after all, does not offer peace, at least not lasting peace. What usually passes for peace is a temporary ceasefire, a brief hiatus from tension and worry. It's the fleeting sense of gratification at achieving something that the world has convinced us we need: a good job, or a happy family, or a tidy

house. Or, it's the postponement of a problem by willfully ignoring it. Or, it's the numbness of self-medication. In any case, it's not really peace.

The peace of God is liberating and enduring, a deep-seated sense of well-being that mitigates the anxieties that creep into our minds. It's an awareness of *shalom*, a welcome recognition of God's faithfulness and care. It's the sincere conviction that God's grace is, in fact, sufficient,² and, in spite of all the headaches and heartache, "it is well, it is well with my soul."³

That's the peace we offer each other after the prayers of intercession. The passing of the peace is "far greater than a sociable handshake or a ritual of friendship or a moment of informality,"⁴ to borrow words from our liturgical manual. **It's nothing short of Christ's own reassuring presence among us, the enactment of his promised peace amid the disorder of our lives. "It is as if each member of the assembly becomes the risen Christ to his or her neighbor."⁵ *Peace be with you. And also with you.***

And, it's not just about being at peace *at Peace*. Jesus' gift of peace is meant to sustain us beyond our weekly worship, and especially at those times when we feel most vulnerable. His peace is featured, for instance, in the liturgy for Compline, or Night Prayer, an occasion at the end of each day to

² 2 Corinthians 12:9.

³ Horatio G. Spafford, "When Peace like a River/It Is Well with My Soul," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, #785.

⁴ Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*, 173.

⁵ *Ibid.*

entrust ourselves to God while we sleep. The Gospel Canticle for Compline makes reference to the song of Simeon, the old prophet who rejoices at the chance to hold the baby Jesus in his arms. Bethany and I sing it to Alex as a lullaby:

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace. Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel. Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace.⁶

Jesus' life itself is God's offer of peace to a restless world. His solidarity with us in suffering reminds us that we never suffer alone, and his resurrection to new life signals that our anxieties are ultimately shortsighted. God's peace extends beyond the reach of anxiety and even death to a place where our hearts are no longer troubled, where we know abundant life in its fullness.

Dear church, we can entrust ourselves to God again today. We can let go of all that is outside of our control and rest in the promise of God's enduring grace. Then, we can truly receive the gift of Christ's peace. And once we've internalized it, we can become it for those in the pews around us, and for all those we meet in the week ahead.

⁶ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Assembly Edition, 324.*