

The Gift of Peace
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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John 14:23-29
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Goodbyes are never easy. Not even for Jesus. He had come to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, and he knew exactly what was coming next: a trial and certain death.

But the disciples did not yet understand. How could they? If like them, you had lived in the constant, tangible presence of Jesus, witnessed his mighty deeds, and experienced his abundance, would you ever expect him to leave? And even if you did, would you be well-equipped to handle his absence? Doubtful. Goodbyes are never easy.

Jesus knows his sudden departure will be jarring for the disciples. But he will not leave them ill-equipped to face the future. He will leave them with a gift. Well actually, gifts.

And these gifts were not only used by the earliest disciples, but they are still being used today. By our community, and by every other Christian community.

The Gospel accounts vary about the nature of Jesus' parting gift. Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree that the parting gift was a meal.

Before the storm of Friday morning, Jesus gathered all twelve disciples together for a simple Passover meal of bread and wine. He broke a loaf and shared it. He poured some wine in a cup. And he shared that to. Then he said, "This do in remembrance of me."

Jesus was telling the disciples that each time they gathered together in fellowship, and broke bread in his name, that his presence would be among them. And it is. Each time we celebrate communion, we recall the cramped, simple quarters of thirteen men sharing a meal, and Christ's spirit travels through space and time to join us, to sustain us, to comfort us.

Communion. Eucharist. The Last Supper. This is the familiar version of the goodbye gift, not only in our scriptures, but also in our rituals. And it's a really good gift to be sure.

But this morning, we'll focus our attention on the goodbye gift of John's gospel. It's a little less familiar, but no less valuable.

In this morning's lection, Jesus anticipates the pending trial. But his last moments with the disciples are not around the Passover meal. Instead, John's gospel frames Jesus' goodbye message inside of a two-and-a-half-chapter-long discourse that happens after dinner. We're never told where this discourse happens. Perhaps it's on a walk from the upper room to the garden; perhaps it's in a quiet space; perhaps Jesus told the slow eaters to take a baguette and a wine-toter to-go. Wherever it was, I think it's safe to assume they were in a comfortable, but private space. I like to imagine a stoop or a front porch, or someplace where the real conversations occur.

And here's what Jesus, says:

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 your hearts be afraid.

For the Evangelist, Jesus' final gift is peace. But it's not the kind of peace we too often think of.

Yes, peace can be the absence of conflict: an end to warring or fighting or violence.

But the peace Jesus offers is different. It's bigger and broader. This peace is a presence and a resolve. This peace steadies our anxiety, and sustains our confidence.

Think back to the life and ministry of Jesus. One day on a stormy sea, a fishing boat was being battered by waves, and the disciples were terrified. But Jesus said, "Peace! Be Still!" And the winds ceased. And there was peace. One day, it was getting late, and a large crowd had gathered, and the disciples were anxious about how they would feed all these people. Jesus gifted the disciples and the crowd (and us as well!) the peace that comes with cooperation and sharing: five loaves and two fish are always more than enough in the presence of God! And there was peace! At a well in Samaria, Jesus offered an estranged woman the peace of community; in the home of Mary and Martha, Jesus offered peace in the midst of daily distractions; at the death of Lazarus, Jesus offered the peace of friendship and the hope of God's possibilities; and even after his death, Jesus appeared to a group of frightened disciples in a dark, dank room, and proclaimed: "Peace be with you!"

Jesus of Nazareth loved God fully, wholly, completely. And in that love, Jesus found an inner-peace. This peace allowed him to be confident in the power of God, a power that nothing, not even the might of Rome, nor the sting of death could overcome. And so he lived with what's called a non-anxious presence: the ability to trust, that even in conflict, even in crisis, even in uncertainty, God will be present and active.

Here's another way to describe Jesus' sense of non-anxious presence. Jesus was one who would have proclaimed with confidence: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

In the last moments of his ministry, Jesus tells the disciples that the peace he's given to them in the past, is the same peace he'll give to them in the present and in the future.

"Yes," Jesus says:

There will be conflict. Yes, there will be uncertainty. Yes, there will be grief and pain and hunger and other calamities. But in the midst of all of this, there will also be peace. There will be a presence that steadies you and strengthens you. This is my gift to you. So do not let your hearts be troubled, because this is a gift that has no expiration.

Friends, the peace of Christ, John's farewell gift, is a gift that resides in each of us. And this gift has power! It steadies us to enter places we never imagined we could: hospital waiting rooms; funeral parlors, S.A.T. exams, uncomfortable dinner tables; places where fear and grief and anxiety and uncertainty and heartache and doubt and unhealed wounds can overwhelm us. But this peace, this peace, it tells us we are not alone. It tells us God is present, always working to infuse healing in ways seen and unseen.

And this peace of Christ, it also verifies our worth. The same inner peace that dwelled in Jesus, it also dwells in each of us. It tells us that despite our doubts, despite our self-perceived flaws and faults, God is eager to work with us and through us. A Galilean peasant shared this gift of peace with a rag-tag band of disciples and early-believers. You might call them a motley crew. They shared this peace through the generations – In fact, that peace has traveled two thousand years into the present.

And just as we share the meal they first shared together in the act of Eucharist, we also share the peace that was shared with them in a quiet corner of Jerusalem.

We perform that act every Sunday morning when we proclaim: “May the Peace of Christ be with you.” And our neighbors respond: “And also with you.”

Hear that again. Christ shared the gift of peace with the earliest disciples. And because Christ shared it with them, it means we too can share in that peace. It means we can give and receive Christ’s peace to and from one another.

And in recognition of such a gift, we proclaim: *Halle, Halle, Halle!!!*

Friends, the Peace of Christ be with you, this day and every day! Amen.