

## MEASURING PEACE

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2010

Text: John 14:27

*“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.”*

Sometimes when I am preparing a sermon I feel like a very thin copper wire expected to carry a high voltage current.

For example: this week. Today’s gospel is the story of Jesus bestowing **peace** upon his disciples. So Tuesday morning I’m tossing and turning in bed at 2:00 in the morning, as I mull over this text. I should preach “peace” to you—yet I myself am not at peace. I’m worried instead: Will I get it right? Will I write something good? I want to be true to the Gospel, to my calling, to my Lord, and at the same time preach a sermon that people will like. Plus it should be effective. So I worry.

I am not at peace . . . as I prepare to preach peace.

Fortunately for me, Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.”

Also fortunately for me, I am not going to carry this high voltage current all by my lonesome. You are going to carry it with me. In about fifteen minutes, you will all turn to people around you, and you will convey the peace of the Lord to them. In fact, that is a large part of why you came here today, even if you didn’t think about it that way. You came to share “the peace.” “The peace” being the peace which the about-to-die Jesus gave to his disciples. And not only by shaking hands. The liturgy we speak and sing, the hymns we sing, the readings, the prayers, in all of these we work together to convey Christ’s peace to one another. At the end of the benediction I say “. . . and give you peace.” We sing the closing hymn, and in case that makes you forget what we were doing, I say “Go in peace . . .”

We need that, because all week long, out there in the real world, it can get ugly. There is not a lot of peace. At best, it’s an up-and-down thing. There are a lot of boats in this lake, so the water is not calm.

Still, the world *does* give peace sometimes. Jesus acknowledges as much when he says he doesn’t give it “the way the world gives it.” You do not have to be a Christian to be a peacemaker, even a great peacemaker. Nor does the peace which we get from Christ *feel* any better than the peace we get from, say, hearing something beautiful. Jesus does not say that he gives a different *kind* of peace than the world gives; he just *gives it differently*. Christian *faith* is very distinctive; our hope is unique; the “agape” love of God contrasts sharply with human “eros” love. But peace . . . is peace.

I remember hearing the great countertenor Alfred Deller sing: “Music for a while, will all our cares beguile.” When our hearts are troubled, riled up, thrashing around; or at the other, equally bad extreme, when our hearts are afraid, timid, frozen up (those are the two problems Jesus mentions); it may be something as simple as a song, or another person’s smile that will give us peace once again. This is very important, and I really think it is not minimized by what

Jesus says. On the contrary. Although we don't want to encourage some false ways of making peace—by force, by deceit, etc., we give thanks for all good kinds of peace-making.

Then, what does Jesus mean when he says that he gives not as the world gives?

(I'm going out on a limb here; maybe you know better than I do. But this phrase is ambiguous, and I'm going to attempt an interpretation.)

The world gives peace . . . in *piecemeal* fashion. Peace is measured out to us bit by bit, on an ad hoc basis, whatever is appropriate for that moment. As the song says, "for a while" music will our cares beguile. Then, the concert will be over and our troubles will be back. For each kind of trouble we have, there is a remedy which restores our peace. That kind of peace can come from all sorts of places, and I think it is all from God, no matter who makes it, no matter who gives it to us, because every good gift comes from above, as James teaches us. But there's always something else that can disturb our peace again. "If it isn't one thing, it's another." Then we need another helping, perhaps another kind of peace.

Peace like that could be measured in units of one sort or another, because it is not absolute.

- We could use a personal Richter scale, and say that it is good to keep things down below 1.0.
- Or decibels—peace is anything below, say, sixty decibels.
- "David" would be another unit, where you count your troubles or enemies as you dispose of them. (Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands.)
- How about "Oklahomas" for a unit of peace? "Everything's going my way." As you approach 100% of everything going your way, you approach perfect peace.
- "Queseras." If you could totally accept that "whatever will be will be," you would have total peace, but you'll settle for accepting a certain percentage, based on having a certain amount of Niebuhrs—things that you can change, and are wise enough to know you can, so you do. (See "Serenity Prayer.")

In contrast, the way Jesus gives us peace cannot be measured. He addresses a trouble so fundamental to our existence that we may not even notice it. We are so concerned with getting the *parts* of our life right, e.g., finding something to wear (as Jesus says in Matthew) or placating the people around us (again, Jesus in Matthew), or securing our retirement (again, Jesus in Matthew), that we haven't time for the single and ultimate question of whether life is worth getting right in the first place. (I took pictures all day long in Tivoli Park in Copenhagen without realizing there was no film in my camera. Which was obviously a bigger issue than whether I was using the proper exposure!) If the question of why we live and *to what end* is open, if we doubt that life is good or that we are good enough, or that we are meant to be blessed . . . how can we be at peace just because somebody is nice to us at the checkout?

Jesus gives us that unitary, comprehensive, horizon-to-horizon peace up front. He inaugurates in us, when we become his friends, the peace of knowing we are God's children, and that we are beloved, not because we measure up—for we do not—but because God loves us. That peace becomes a foundation under all the parts of our lives. He lets us identify with him, abide

in his word, listen to his Spirit . . . and assures us that we are thereby immune to meaninglessness and destruction.

A propos of Mother's Day: Robert Farrar Capon wrote a book about marriage many years ago, and I remember him talking about how a mother uniquely gives a family its sense of place, of home, and of belonging there. In a similar way, Jesus gives to his family on earth the sense that within a world full of alienation we have a permanent place to be, wherever we go, and despite what is wrong with us—within God, and with thousands of brothers and sisters who will always be ours. He gives us peace by making us members of that household, here in this world, in which he and the Father and the Spirit also live. We live with God. We see that we are part of that household when we gather with our brothers and sisters and share the peace with them. Or maybe we have experiences like that of Paul and his friends in the First Reading: Lydia welcomed them into her home because she loved the peace they shared. Maybe it looks like the vision in the second reading: a huge city into which the nations bring their glory, where kings come together without armies. But mainly we just carry it in our hearts, this knowledge that we are one household, and we belong and are loved.

If we had more time, I'd outline the Lord's Prayer for you in detail, because it is a prayer for peace. But let me just suggest that you think of it as a prayer for the peace Jesus gives us. The second half of the prayer specifies all the things that trouble our hearts or make us timid. The *first* half acknowledges that the second half is fulfilled when I stop worrying first about everyone liking me, me owning what I want, and me controlling other people. Instead, may the Father's name be hallowed, his kingdom come, his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This adds up to one thing: accepting the peace Jesus gives.

*"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

Gifted with such peace, may you find the strength to be the peacemaker Jesus calls you to be. Amen.