

The First Baptist Church, Midland
Luke 2:8-14; John 14:25-31
December 13, 2009 – Third Sunday in Advent

The Legacy of Peace
An Advent Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: God's Peace

I didn't have my grandmother for many years of my childhood, but I remember her well. The truth is, I had only one living grandparent as I was growing up and *gramma* as I called her was a very special person in my life.

She was just a little bitty woman, about 4' 10", and that was before she began to shrink because of her rheumatoid arthritis. I remember her hands were curled almost beyond recognition and I remember she had a hard time moving around. To make matters worse, her sight was failing and while she could see images, she couldn't discern detail. I know now that she was living in a lot of horrible pain, but I never once heard her complain or display any form of bitterness.

Gramma lived with my aunt in Elizabeth, NJ, and about once a month we would go to visit. I always looked forward to the trip. We got donuts from the donut bus along the way to take to gramma and she always shared them with me. And then one day when I was just a little guy, gramma came to live with us.

She took my room because we only had two bedrooms in our tiny house and I slept on the couch. But that was okay. I didn't mind because having gramma live with us was worth it. I'd come home from school at lunch time (that's what you did in those days in our neighborhood schools) to get lunch for gramma and me. Okay, my mom actually had it all ready and I just got it out. But every day we would be together until I had to go back to school... just gramma and me.

She always sat in the living room and I'd take her lunch there, because as I said, she couldn't move about very well. She sat in what was my dad's favorite chair. At least it was his favorite until gramma came and stole it away, but he didn't mind. And sitting next to her chair were two books. Can you guess what they were? One was the Bible and the other was a hymn book. Now why she had those two books right next to her I'll never know because as I said, gramma couldn't see anything but vague images. But I remember coming home from school in the afternoon some days to find her sitting in her chair with the hymn book open in her lap, her head leaning back, her eyes closed quietly humming or singing a hymn. It didn't matter that she couldn't read the music or the words because, you see, she knew them all by heart.

Gramma lived with us for maybe a year and her health was in serious decline. Finally, she got to the place where she couldn't be alone any longer and then she went back to live with my Aunt Rae once again. She was home throughout the day and could care for gramma. We made our trips to visit more regularly now... in fact, we went about every week. I'm sure my parents knew gramma didn't have a lot of time left. And they were right...

It must have been sometime after Thanksgiving when grandma passed because I remember visiting with her in her room. And laying on the bed next to her were those same two books.

When she saw us come in, she perked up a little and tried to reach for one of those books but she was too weak so my dad picked one up for her. “Is it your Bible mom, is that what you want?” Of course it was. “What do you want me to read, Mom,” he asked, and somehow she managed to mumble, “*The Christmas story?*” When my dad started to read, she just smiled and nodded her head, taking in every word. I sat right next to her on the bed while he and my mother stood on either side of the bed. And when he was done, he took the hymn book and opened it gently placing it on her chest and then went to the next room where the piano was to play some carols. He always played the piano for my grandma when we visited because she loved it. He could play anything on that old grand. And do you know, the whole time my dad read and played, my grandma had this angelic look upon her face almost as if she was living the story. Now I know that this is exactly what grandma was doing.

She didn’t live too long after that, and even though I was a little guy I remember that she didn’t seem afraid. In fact, my grandma wasn’t afraid of anything. And it took me awhile to figure it out, but now I’m confident I know why. She had no fear because she was living with a deep centering peace that enabled her to reach beyond her circumstance. What a legacy to leave for the people you love.

Back in 1872, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem that was set to music about 15 years later. We know it today as *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

Breath through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still small voice of calm!

This was my grandmother. I don’t know... maybe I’m a dreamer. But I like to think this still small voice – especially during this holy season of the year – was the voice of a child... and even more to the point, maybe the voice of an infant. For with the coming of Jesus into the world, I think there was a new regard for peace... a new understanding for a kind of balanced serenity standing at the center of our being. And though it wouldn’t come for 33 years, there was a moment when this little Jesus, now a man, would speak to this eternal tranquility. Remember the 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.”
(John 14:27)

The angels pointed toward this on the night he was born, didn't they? *Glory to God in the highest heaven*, the angelic presence proclaimed, *and on earth peace among those whom he favors!* In a sense it was prophetic because even as these words echoed at the very beginning of his life, so they found their meaning at the very end. *Peace I leave with you... my peace I give to you.*

These are the words of Jesus spoken to the disciples during their final evening together in the upper room. And it's this same peace to which the angels referred that this Messiah would leave to all people seeking a sense of meaning and direction in their lives. What a gift. So let's see what this serenity is all about.

First we have to note that when we speak of God's peace we're not just talking about the absence of conflict. Needless to say, we are living in a broken world. Our own nation is engaged in two wars at this very moment, and when you step back it's hard to find any place on the globe that is not suffering from cruelty and aggression. Violence has become so much a part of our world doing harm not only to the human enterprise, but to creation itself. Our world is in turmoil and our environment is under assault. It's hard to find peace anywhere. Maybe that's why we desperately need to hear from the Messiah once more.

For you see, when we speak of God's peace we're not just talking about the absence of conflict. There are times when disagreement is inevitable and discord is prevalent... maybe, as Barack Obama suggested this week when receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, even necessary. Remember the encounter Jesus had with the moneychangers in the temple? Or, do you recall his words early on in Matthew (10:34), **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** Yes, there will always be dissension and tension, but it doesn't mean there can't be peace. For this gift Jesus is bringing is something much more, because for Jesus peace was more than the absence of struggle. It was the presence of love. It meant having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. This was my grandmother. She had somehow managed to carve out of the ugly world of pain and suffering in which she was living, a quiet sense of God's peace. And this is what Jesus was talking about.

This peace he promised has to do with being grounded. It has to do with loving life and finding meaning in the way you live it. Put another way, this peace Jesus is introducing calls us to understand we are children of God gifted in many different ways. And it is the expectation of our Creator that we will use these gifts to enhance the world in which we are living thereby finding pleasure and satisfaction and meaning because we know we are in touch with our spiritual foundations. We are motivated by our love for who we are, for what we are doing, and for how we are touching God's creation. This is the peace Jesus came to introduce, and obviously it doesn't suggest there will be no conflict or tension or dis-ease.

Look at the life of Jesus himself. What was his passion? He loved people and he was driven in all he did to help them grow to love themselves not in a conceited or arrogant way but in a graceful way. And he was driven to enable each of us to love others, and ultimately to love God. Everything rests upon this threefold foundation... love yourself, love your neighbor, and love God. This is clearly the vehicle that leads one toward peace.

Now when you think about it, this has a wonderful way of playing itself out. If I am at peace with myself, I don't need to be in conflict with you, for conflict is drawn out of a desire for power and control. If I am in control of myself and centered upon those values that stand at the core of my being... if I am living out of those areas where God has blessed me and gifted me, I am finding my fulfillment and I don't have to worry about controlling someone else in order to prove my worth and find my satisfaction. This is what Jesus is talking about, my dear friends, when he 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 them be afraid.*

It's an encouraging word in a troubling time, isn't it, and that's why we remember it every year as we light this special candle on the advent wreath. *Peace I leave with you...* Once again, Whittier said it so well...

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.

Amen and AMEN!

1872 - John Greenleaf Whittier

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