

The First Baptist Church, Midland
John 14:27
December 2, 2007 – First Sunday in Advent

The Legacy of Peace

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

“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

Have you ever heard a more comforting promise. *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 yes, it is unusual to focus upon them in the context of the nativity. For the coming of Jesus into the world was anything but peaceful. To the contrary, it was rather chaotic wasn't it, at least when we put it in the context of Matthew's account.

The decree went out... the registration followed... Mary and Joseph found themselves in the unenviable position of having to travel quite a distance in order to be enrolled... and then there was the delivery of a child in a crude stable with people and animals flitting about here, there and everywhere. Hardly ideal. Far from peaceful. But nevertheless, very real. And through the surprise of the unexpected, peace entered the world. *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.* These were the words of the angelic presence... remember? Yes, from the beginning of life to the closing moment of death's impending doom, peace is proclaimed through the person of Jesus. And it would serve us well to think once more about the significance of this gift as we stand on the threshold of the Christmas season.

I'm pretty confident I can say with assurance that there isn't a person among us who would not be praying for peace in the troubled waters of our day. Cruelty and aggression surrounds us and have become, dare I say it, common place. Violence has become so much a part of our culture 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, and that's why we desperately need to hear from the Messiah once more.

Toward that end, let's see if we can't clarify what his serenity is all about because 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 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 meant more than the absence of struggle. It meant the presence of love. It meant having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.

Allow me an example. Our youngest son is struggling to make ends meet. He doesn't earn much money but to his credit, he doesn't have great expense because he lives rather simply. He has his degree from a great educational institution, but he's not using it. This kind of bothers his old man. I watch and see his life as a great effort to make ends meet. He supports himself by working as a server on the morning shift at the Hilton Hotel and is essentially living off his tips. It is a struggle to keep his head above water and it causes a lot of worry for Paula and me. And we keep telling ourselves that he's going to wake up one of these days and figure it all out and find a real job. There's only one thing I didn't mention in this scenario.

Jamie is one of the happiest people on the face of the earth. He is a musician who is driven by his vision and living his dream. He absolutely loves what he is doing, finding tremendous satisfaction in his work. He's now with six different groups in the Nashville area, and when he isn't playing for small audience somewhere in the southeast, he's in a recording studio nearly every day. Of course, Paula and I often ask the question... *How did you do last night? Did you get paid?* And most of the time the answer is the same... *No, not this time. I'm paying my dues. But my day is coming...* He believes that with all his heart, mind and soul. His passion drives his living every day and he is wholly and happily himself.

This is what Jesus was talking about. It is a Greek concept that 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 in our living 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. That is the peace Jesus has come 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, to love others, and to love God. What is the greatest commandment? You remember... *To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.* It all starts with our ability to love ourselves, not in a conceited or arrogant way, but in a graceful way. Everything else rests upon this foundation. It 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.*

When we live finding our peace within, we become a beacon reflecting light out into the world all around. And it is the light of God's truth because we are demonstrating this lifestyle

that God has called us to embrace. We model this peaceful living for others, and the world around us becomes more peaceful.

Robert Fulghum is a wonderful writer and in his little book, It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It (New York: Villard Books, 1989, pgs. 176-77), he speaks to this issue of being wholly and happily yourself... of being peacefully centered... and sharing it with the world.

Fulghum describes Alexander Papaderos, a teacher of Greek culture, a politician, a doctor of philosophy and a remarkably complete human being. This is another way of saying he discovered and lived this concept of peace that Jesus brings to life. Listen to what Papaderos says...

"When I was a small child, during the war we were poor and lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.... I kept one, the largest piece.... By scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became [mature], I grew to understand that this was a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light truth, understanding, knowledge - is there, and it will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of the world... and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise."

So the challenge it would seem is to take a mirror and catch the rays of the morning sun and let them shine on your face, in your heart, and out into the dark places in the world. This I believe is what shalom - God's peace - is all about... being centered, feeling complete, being wholly and happily yourself and reflecting that to the world in which you find yourself.

"Pie in the sky," you say? I suppose it is to some extent especially when we ponder the realities of our day. Yet the promise of inner peace brought to life by the Messiah is still very much alive for God has delivered on his promise.

This table reflects that peace perhaps as no other symbol, for Jesus was at peace within himself as he prepared to be with his Lord. Yet at the same time he was engaged in an incredible conflict, wasn't he. His life on this good earth was over and he knew it. Soon he would face the rigors of a humiliating trial and a torturous death. He would face rejection by the people to whom he was the closest. His life on the outside was in chaos. But on the inside, he was at peace.

The well known writer who happened to be a Quaker, John Greenleaf 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!