

Peace/Shalom

Los Altos United Methodist Church

John 14:23–29

1.



Tomorrow is Memorial Day. On this day, we remember and honor those who have died serving our country in wars. Thinking of the costly, life-giving acts of these men and women encourages us deeply contemplate the meaning of peace and justice. Take this day as an opportunity to reclaim the gift of peace from the perspective of your death. We are now living in a time of uncertainty and insecurity, with a relatively high level of tension and threats to our safety and peace, raising concerns about a possible war between Iran and the United States. Last week, the State of Alabama signed into law the Human Life Protection Act, making almost all abortions illegal in the state, even in cases of rape or incest. In our United Methodist Church, it is becoming more likely that we will dismantle our denomination and reshape the United Methodist Church, possibly at next year's 2020 General Conference in May in Minneapolis. Some of you may have been going through personal distress, sadness, loneliness, or grief due to broken relationships. Where do you find peace amidst these challenges? I invite all of us this morning to listen to Christ Jesus' parting words for his disciples and find the gift of peace that Jesus gives to us that the world cannot give. I hope that the peace from God will help us and comfort us in our distress and personal mourning.

2.



Today's Scripture tells us of Jesus' parting gift to his disciples before his death and resurrection. Put your time clock back for a moment to before Easter. As Margaret (8:30 a.m.) and Nancy (10:00 a.m.) read in the Scripture for us, Jesus told his disciples Peter, Thomas, Phillip, Judas, and maybe others that he would leave them soon. They would have to maintain their faith without Jesus. Can we imagine the disciples' feelings of shock, fear, and anxiety when they heard this announcement? They must have been sad, confused, worried, and afraid about their faith, mission, and purpose in life. For those disciples who were afraid, Jesus offered a special gift that the world could not give them. That gift only comes from God, and it is

offered to us as well. And, Jesus added a footnote, saying that if you find it hard to receive it, the Holy Spirit will help you and make everything plain to you. That is the gift of peace! Jesus said to his disciples that this gift of peace would help them to stand firm for Jesus, carrying on their mission and keeping their faith without Jesus. Are you clear about what you are going to receive from Jesus? Or do we need to ask Jesus for clarification like the disciples did? Earlier chapters record that none of the disciples could comprehend what Jesus was talking about. Maybe we need the Holy Spirit's personal assistance to help us understand this gift of peace that Jesus offers. What kind of peace in the world is Jesus talking about here?

3.



Jesus would have used the Hebrew word for peace, which is *shalom*. Shalom means more than the absence of conflict or wars. It signifies completeness, fullness, a hope for the reality of wholeness and well-being. In other words, it is a totally different kind of peace than any the world can give or produce. Imagine what kinds of peace the world can give us. Maybe national security or financial security, or winner takes power for justice? Then, what are the things that the world cannot give us? Shalom or Jesus' peace is not merely the absence of struggle; it is also the presence of love and the reality of the hope that Jesus offers himself as Christ to us. We are invited to receive the Christ, the divine peace, in our empty hearts so that we are in Christ and Christ lives in us. That's the peace that fills us up!

During the last few weeks, we have lost several beloved people to death: *Bob McConnel, Pat Osborne, Lea Hayden, and Daniel Kreitter*—and perhaps others who are beloved to you. Jesus' gift of peace gives us something eternal and priceless, even in the face of such losses. This peace gives us a new life that helps us not to feel abandoned and bereft. The peace that Jesus offers us is a special gift that enables us to be connected to eternity here and now. This isn't something that the world can give us.

4.



The gift of peace is Christ's presence of love. Christ is not merely the body of Jesus but is the presence of God's divine joy, love, and peace dwelling in us and giving us inner peace, tranquility, and a firm foundation even amidst the challenges that we are facing. God's blessings of peace overflows in

Jesus, and it continues to flow to us and to others. We are called to love others and to build peace within us and among us. Christ's peace helps us live our lives forward with strength and boldness.

5.



I found an image that helps us understand the gift of peace that Jesus gave to his disciples and to us. This is a screenshot from the film *Everyday Creativity* by Jones Dewitt, a National Geographic photographer. He captured an image of the contrast between a raging waterfall and a nearby tree. I want you to draw your attention and focus to the tree right next to the waterfall. What images come into your mind? A waterfall is a powerful symbol of life that includes threat and the pressures of stress and distress, but this tree is very well grounded in the earth and stands firm despite the raging water right next to it. Truly, peace is not the absence of turmoil or struggle. Rather, it is like a little tree at the side of a waterfall. That's the peace that Jesus wants to give to us! If faith is unseen things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1), then peace gives us the emotion of faith in the assurance of God's presence as we audaciously can speak to our hearts, "I will be at peace in my soul for God is with me."

6.



Where do we find Christ's peace in the violently raging waterfall that is our beloved United Methodist Church now? February's Special Called General Conference and last April's Judicial Council's rulings on the decision to adopt the Traditional Plan affirm our church's current discriminative language and laws prohibiting the full inclusion of LGBTQ in relation to ordination and the celebration of marriage by our clergy in our churches. Based on Jesus' teachings, which group of people is being treated as second-class citizens as recipients of Christ's peace and love? Early this week, the UMC Next group, which is composed of almost 600 people from each of the 54 annual conferences along with bishops gathered in Kansas City to create a vision for the church, stated that they believe that there is room at the table for all in God's kingdom. Many of the leaders in the United Methodist Church anxiously expect that May 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis will be a historic moment in which we can improve the future of our church by creating a home for

all. At this time, nobody knows what the future United Methodist Church will look like. Only God knows. It seems that we feel it is hard to find the gift of Christ's peace among us, but Christ promised that he will never leave us, never let us feel abandoned. Jesus says to us, *Don't be upset. Don't be distraught.* I'm still living with you (*The Message*). Let us place our trust in God and open our hearts, believing that God is faithful always and forever. God will grant us peace.

7.



The gift of peace comes from God and flows through Jesus Christ. It starts with our being in right relationship with God. There is one important thing that we need to remember when we seek God's peace.

Peace must begin with ourselves. Thomas Merton a Catholic priest and spiritual master shares his spiritual insight with us in his book *Seeds of Contemplation* as follows:

If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed—but hate these things in yourself, not in another.¹

And he continues to remind us of an important spiritual tenet related to seeking God's peace. He says,

We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves. And we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.²

Once we are in right relationship with God through Christ, the gift of peace flows into us. As one of our hymns puts it,

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul

When we receive *this* peace in our souls, it flows through us and reaches out to others through our acts of justice and hearts of compassion and songs of joy. A bumper sticker on the car of one of our church staff says, "If you want peace, work

¹ Thomas Melton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing House, 2007), 122.

² Thomas Melton, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1956), xiii.

for justice.”³ This is true. Peace requires us to be bold and strong, standing firm and righteous for the goodness of God. Last Sunday, when we sang our closing hymn, we sang and claimed that “God will delight when we are creators of justice, joy, compassion and peace.” Peace is a place where everyone is invited, welcomed, and accepted in the love of God. The gift of peace we are given leads us to do God’s work for justice through our actions and words. The prophets Micah and Amos remind us of what is good and what God requires from us: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NRSV) “Let Justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)”

Friends and spiritual siblings, I am still thinking of the beloved people who have died and of the families who are moving into sadness and grief in the face of their losses. I’m also thinking of those who feel upset and distraught by events in society, current politics, and the church’s current situation. Let us begin by being at peace with God. Christ Jesus wants to offer us a special gift that will keep us bold, strong, and audacious in our hope and faith. That divine gift of peace will guide and comfort us and help us to get up again and move forward even in the midst of our sorrow and mourning and distress over our losses.

Let your hearts and minds open to receive Christ’s peace in your hearts and let God’s peace continue to flow through you and strengthen you and transform our church and world into the kingdom of God where love and peace prevail. May God’s blessing of peace be upon all of you. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. When have you experienced a gift of peace that gave you a sense of well-being in your heart? What made it special for you?
2. How do you differentiate the gift of Christ’s peace from the gifts that the world can give to you?
3. How is God nudging you to receive a gift of peace?
4. If peace is not the absence of struggle or conflict but the presence of love, what commitments and actions will enrich your life as you share your love and peace in all you do?

³ Pope Paul VI, Message of His Holiness Pope Paul VI for the Celebration of the Day of Peace, January 1, 1972, La Santa Sede, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html, accessed May 23, 2019.