

"THERE'S THAT 'PEACE' THING AGAIN!"

John 14:25-27

November 11, 2018

[Jesus said to his disciples:] *"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 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 over, finally. Nobody is completely happy, except about a few things:

1. Raise your hand if you will miss the campaign ads on your television screen, rolling across your internet, being copied and pasted on your social media, or invading the privacy of your home through robo-calls to your telephone line day and night, night and day;
2. The stress of the actual election day is over; and
3. The days start getting longer again just after Christmas.

Jesus tells his anxious disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." It seems there is no peace in our country, not anywhere, not any hour, not any day. Except for here, right now, in this hour, the hour and day that the Lord has made.

I, for one, am ready to take a big long deep breath of relief that we are here together, despite best efforts of folks to separate us into

opposing camps. Yes, I am relieved there are no televisions in this sanctuary, our cellphones have been silenced (they have, haven't they??), our newspapers are back home on our kitchen tables, and we are informed this morning not by anger and accusation, but by prayer and scripture, song and the healing presence of the Spirit that Jesus offered his friends and offers us still.

Today, as last Sunday, we explore the Gospel of John and the message John was fervently trying to get his readers to understand and adopt into their own faith lives. You may remember the story we studied last week:

Jesus has been crucified and his loyal, terrified remnant hides in a secluded room out of sight of the Romans and Pharisees who are earnestly hunting for them. The men and women of Jesus are milling about, brooding, grieving the loss of their Rabbi and leader. They are in disbelief over the whole affair, including that their own brother Judas was the one to turn Jesus in and thus, to seal his fate.

There is no peace in the upper room. They have not yet argued about who among them is the greatest, which ones of them knows best the heart of their Master, or who will lead them into their future. All that comes soon enough in the story and lasts forever. Christendom *still* is arguing about all these claims. At this point in the narrative however, John shows them sitting shell-shocked, numb, and confused.

Jesus walks right in through the locked doors and casually greets the stunned disciples, saying, "Peace be with you." We explored last week the oddness and utter inappropriateness of this statement given the poor disciples' circumstances. John turns the story on its ear with that one simple sentence. "Peace be with you," says Jesus to the disciples and by proxy to John's 1st century Christian brothers and sisters who so far have survived the brutal Roman persecution. How could he say such a thing that sounds like mockery?

This theme of 'peace' ends John's Gospel story, and it appears throughout his writing. Five times Jesus gifts his close associates with some variance of the phrase, "Peace be with you."

He says it twice in today's scripture and he said it twice in last week's passage, as if to underscore it for his disciples. He says it two times also in Chapter 14. Additionally, he comforts them by saying, "let not your heart be troubled." He says it in verse 1 and repeats the exact phrase again in verse 27.

This literary technique is not an accident on John's part. John uses it throughout his gospel. Theologian Sam O'Neal teaches us that there are three reasons for this echoing technique among Biblical authors:

- **First, the use of repetition in the Bible usually emphasizes the importance of a person, theme, or event.** This makes sense for the Gospels because the story of Jesus' earthly ministry and mission is the most important event in the history of our faith. The presence of four distinct accounts of Jesus' life emphasizes his importance.

- **Second, the repetition of the Gospels offers greater credibility.** In the ancient world, legal testimonies were considered valid if they could be substantiated by at least two or three witnesses. By having four separate accounts written by four distinct witnesses, the Bible offers a highly reliable portrait of who Jesus was and what he did and said.
- **Third, the use of repetition in the Gospels allowed the biblical authors to approach the Jesus story from different angles and perspectives.** Each of the gospel narratives had its own purpose and audience. In John's case, he was writing some 60 years after the death of Jesus and 20 years after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This was during a time when people were arguing back and forth about the nature of Jesus and the future of the faith.

When I think about the essential nature of Jesus, a Native American folk story comes to mind about now. Many of you know this one:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life:

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil-he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you-and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

Jesus doesn't come to bring peace to the world. We may think so, or more accurately perhaps, we may *want* to believe so, but his Why-his core mission- is not to still the waters of faith.

Quite to the contrary, Jesus is all about *troubling* those waters. He is about sending the Spirit's wind howling through the night to blow the bedcovers off the sleeping forms of the religiously complacent. He is about questioning the rules, upsetting the assumed order of things, and putting marginalized persons at the head of the feasting table.

Jesus is not about peace; peace is not his Why. And yet, he greets the grieving disciples by offering them peace. He upsets the social order of things and discounts decades of careful religious indoctrination yet tells his friends to not let their hearts be troubled!

This is troubling! There's that "peace" thing again! How are we to find peace when we are conflicted? How are we to choose between the two wolves in our hearts when all our emotions and fears and hates and loves and dreams and *nightmares* are all at once swirling about in our heads? These days it seems like an impossible choice, doesn't it? How can the wolf of peace ever win the fight for our heart?

That's why we need to engage in the self-reflection inherent in asking the Why of our lives. What is our mission? What is our *raison d'etre*, our reason for being? It is only when we discover this that we can experience a peaceful head and a heart on fire for God.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her wonderful book, *An Altar in the World*, said this about how Jesus leads us to examine the Why of our lives:

When people wanted him to tell them what God's realm was like, he told them stories about their own lives. When people wanted him to tell them God's truth about something, he asked them what they thought. With all kinds of opportunities to tell people what to think, he instead told them what to do.

Peace comes only in knowing your why. When you are grounded thusly, you have no need to seek peace, no need for the wolves to fight, because you then know what you *must do to save your very life*.

Likewise, the church—this church, needs to know its Why—its core mission, the reason for being, its *raison d'etre*. Once a church knows its purpose—its Why—then its calling and mission in the world flows out from that place.

Take UCC Parker Hilltop. Our first mission five years ago was just to *make it*. You heard Dick and Jean Sherer recall that Hilltop UCC was gasping for air 6 years ago—a very few loyal parishioners were bearing a tremendous load and that load was slowly crushing their enthusiasm for church and their sense of hope.

Jack Nordin told you that during the same time that very thing was happening at Parker UCC. Despite having committed folks intent on making the new church start successful, it was not, and the good Christians there were also bearing an impossible, crushing load.

Joe and Jan Narracci five years ago last week came upon an experimental coming back together of the two churches, once bitterly split. They came on our red-letter day—we were all wearing red as a symbol that the Spirit was making something new here in our hearts and minds. They liked what they found; the church culture that they needed they found here—an open and affirming group of welcoming, faithful seekers.

The *Why* of five years ago was mere *existence*. It was *reconciliation after divorce*. It was trying *not to fail*. The *Why* of five years ago was mostly borne out in defending against the negatives: churches that had split over social politics and internal power struggles *did not* come back together; there was *no* model for doing so. No one gave us much of a chance to successfully reunite, much less to sustain ministry here. We did not have the active support of the Conference or Association. We were on our own, predicted to fail.

But we felt Jesus encourage us, saying, "Peace I give to you," and peace we sought. We listened as Jesus gently admonished us, "Let not your heart be troubled," and we received instead the rushing, revitalizing wind of the Holy Spirit, urging us forward into reconciliation and renewal. We

knew then our *Why*. We were supposed to be as one heart in this broken and lonely world.

Here we are five years way beyond those tentative first few months of our mutual ministry at UCC Parker Hilltop, and it is time to engage anew the question of our Why, for we are a new thing; we are not the same as we were then. We have not folded. We have not caved in to an expectation of failure. We have Spirit and we are thriving. Hallelujah!

A few months ago, your Church Council sent Paul Campbell, Denise Mann, and Al Thompson to a UCC Planning and Building event in San Antonio. Together with the Long-Range Planning Team that has recently started its work, these three visionaries will begin soon to engage the entire congregation in planned exercises designed to help us discover our current Why, the reason we exist as a church, our *raison d'être*.

Much of this work will not be peaceful! It will not be peaceful in much the same way as the first disciples knew no peace. The Spirit is at play here at UCC Parker Hilltop, and Spirit is gonna shake us up! Spirit will wake us up from our afternoon nap, for Spirit is dynamic, never static.

Jesus gave the bleary-eyed men and women of his time the gift of the Holy Spirit, but he also gave Spirit to the succeeding generations—to *our* generation. For me there is peace in knowing we will not do this work alone—this hard work to which we are being called.

Spirit is here with us and make no mistake about it, *we are called, and we are a prophetic church.* What are we now being called to? What would this community lose if we were not here? What is our core Why? That is why John's Jesus walks back through that locked door to the upper room. He walks back in because those disciples needed to ask themselves, "What is our Why? How are we called now to be church? And how can God help us answer these questions?"

John's Jesus walks through our doors each and every Sunday, declaring that peace is at hand. He assures us that our collective heart should not be troubled, for Spirit is with us, within us, and all around us. How will we respond when Jesus says, "Peace be with you?"

The election rhetoric is over. The political campaigns are history. Voting signs lie still in recycle bins all across our nation. The wolves are still at war within our country—perhaps they always will be. But here at home in this church, Spirit is moving us forward. John's Jesus is again in our midst, and he is asking questions, not giving answers. He is telling us what we are to do, not what we are to think. Jesus offers us the gift of peace that truly passes all understanding, but to receive it, we must decide which wolf we will feed. Spirit is calling to us, for it is the right time—God's time—to make this new thing new again.

May It Be So.