

## The Spirited Way of Peace

John 14:23-29

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"How could Jesus speak of peace at a time like this?!" If the disciples didn't say this out loud, they were surely thinking it. Peace probably felt to them like a cheap parting gift. Peace? How about super-human strength to deal with the obstacles they were going to face in their mission (we know that nearly all of the disciples were martyred in the end). Or how about super-intelligence to outsmart their opponents, who would scheme to silence the spread of God's good news.

What they really wanted was for Jesus to stay alive and help get this new movement of love off the ground? After all, it was his idea. Peace, I imagine, was the last thing on their minds.

The passage read a moment ago is part of what is known as "The Farewell Discourse", a collection of Jesus's final speeches, included in John, chapters 13-17. Some say it is in these doorway moments when some of the most important things are said. In that threshold between life and death, Jesus imparts arguably his most profound assurances and wisdom to his closest friends.

And why revisit these words long after the fanfare of Easter Sunday has faded? Because these 7 weeks from empty tomb to Pentecost mark a necessary transfer of power. Jesus's earthly ministry was coming to an end. If the gospel message was to move from rational brain thinking to a matter of the heart, if this message was to spread throughout the known world to all people, it was necessary for Jesus to make way for the Holy Spirit. This was an empowering move.

Anyone who manages teams is aware how people will lean on a single leader as long as that leader centers themselves. Yet, as soon as the alpha is no longer in the picture, everyone in the group rises to the

occasion, filling in the gaps, to collectively “get the work done.” This is why Jesus could say, in the passage just before our text: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” We will do greater works than Jesus? That sounds blasphemous! Yet Jesus knew that releasing Jesus-like people into the world could multiply the work of healing and wholeness exponentially. For this, the Holy Spirit would come as enabler and advocate.

But the gift of peace? You could hear the angst and confusion in the disciples’ questioning: “Lord, where are you going?” “Why can’t I follow you now?” “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Their leader was about to be mockingly crucified at the hands of the Roman government. Scholars agree that the gospel of John was written toward the end of the first century, likely in the 90’s AD. This means that the early believers would still have had the rubble from the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD in their rearview mirrors. And with death, destruction, and persecution collapsing all around, I imagine the last thing the disciples wanted to hear was talk about peace.

Now, I am aware of the risk it is also to stand up here this morning with a sermon about peace. While it’s possible these aren’t the worst of times, they most certainly are not the best of times—and that’s being generous. How are we to think about Jesus’s promise of peace for our own time?

“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.” Jesus draws a contrast between his way of peace and the way of the world. And just what is the world’s way? Well, the hearers of John’s gospel would have had in mind Pax Romana, “Roman Peace.” This was a period of stability and prosperity throughout the Empire that lasted for nearly 200 years. But it was a false peace, accomplished through the strong arm of violence, dominance, and suppression. Is that real security? Know Caesar (k-n-

o-w), know peace. No Caesar (n-o), no peace. As long as you're on the side of the dominant power, you would be protected—trading allegiance for national security.

Today, we still operate under false promises of peace. The current administration just had passed into law the sale of devices which turn guns into fully automatic weapons, essentially enabling any gun to be a machine gun. Supporters of the law claim that increasing the rate at which we can fire guns will somehow keep us safer. Because we don't just need more guns, evidently we need faster guns too.

This administration also just proposed an increased \$1 trillion budget for defense and homeland security while at the same time slashing funds for education, foreign aid, environmental work, and health and public assistance. All of this, we are reminded, aligns with the current president's campaign of attaining "Peace Through Strength", our very own Pax Americana. But does it all help us sleep better at night? In every age of Empire, a truth holds: If there is not care and provision for all, then there is true security for none. The Prince of Peace offers an alternative: Pax Christi, the peace of Christ.

If it does not come through systems of power, then is peace solely an interior project? How many times in the past year have you shared that classic meme with a friend or family member: The one that says, "It's fine, I'm fine, everything's fine" with the cartoon image of a happy dog with his cup of coffee all the while everything around is on fire. Is peace simply the absence of conflict or war?

I was remembering this week a time when I was a young teen and my mom was going through a really hard time. At that time, she was a young mother, parenting three boys as a single-parent, going to school, working a job just to support us. And in a moment when everything was just too much to deal with, she told us boys, "We're going to become Amish and move to an Amish community." I later found out what my brothers knew right away—and what you have already assumed—Mom was obviously just reacting to the difficulties of life but didn't really mean it. Yet, I remember telling my friends at

school and teachers: “I may not be able to talk to you in a few days because our family was moving to an Amish community.” What that meant to me was we were going to get rid of most of our belongings—including all our technology, wear simple, colorless outfits, and work to make butter on a farm. I was intrigued but also very confused. My mom was later horrified that I actually believed her to that level.

Do you ever just want to get away, get rid of your cell phone, find an exotic location, and sip mai tais until the sun sets? Southwest airlines, with their slogan Wanna Get Away?, made a marketing campaign off of this longing to find peace through disconnecting. This slogan banks on what has become a \$44 billion dollar travel destination explosion. The way of the world is to escape life—whatever it takes to find your peace, even if the world is on fire.

Indeed, Jesus would often get away to pray, but this would prepare him—not for a life of solitude—but to run to where the world most needed healing. It was in the messiness of living where he invested himself. Often this was in confronting systems of power and exposing the idolatry of false securities. The church is still learning what Jesus modeled—that Peace doesn’t come just in the absence of conflict.

If any of you have watched the hit show *The White Lotus*—creator, Mike White, exposes how even when surrounded by the beauty of exotic vacation resorts, travelers cannot seem to escape the troubles of life they carry with them. Even in paradise, many of the characters are torn apart by interpersonal—and internal—conflicts and flaws. The message is clear: Getting away from it all doesn’t heal the dissonance inside of us.

While the systems of this world cannot assure us, peace, too, does not come from simply tuning the world out. For Jesus, peace was a product of connection.

A paradox is happening in our time: While we are becoming globalized and connected through the widespread availability of technology, at the same time, we are becoming increasingly

disconnected from one another... from nature... and from self. We are now living in an unprecedented global loneliness emergency, say the social experts. The United Kingdom and Japan have named "loneliness ministers" to address this problem. In 2023, the World Health Organization declared loneliness a pressing public-health concern. Shortly after, then-President Joe Biden issued a warning signaling an "epidemic of loneliness."

"Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness; But it's better than drinkin' alone." We resonate with Billy Joel's lyric from Piano Man in our shared crisis. Globalism and technology are not holding true to their promises of helping us feel more connected and instead leave us silo-ed off from one another. The Spirit of Peace comes through connecting. The disciples feared abandonment more than anything. And in the intimacy of a shared meal around the table, Jesus reassures them: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."

Religion is infused with the mission of connection. The word "religion" in the Latin, "religio", carries the meaning "to bind" or "to connect." It was never the intention of the religious life to silo off from society as some separate entity. Though isolation from the world may bring partial and temporary peace, true peace is a result of connection: to one another, self, and creation.

At this church, each Sunday we share in the passing of the peace; early Christians would give what they call "The kiss of peace." Have you heard of this? They would literally kiss each other on the lips as an intimate sign of their unity and connection in fellowship.

So, I hereby declare that henceforth in the Presbyterian Church in Leonia... (we will give the kiss of peace). :) I'm kidding.

What we feel when we are connecting with each other, is what science has already affirmed: Science tells us that we are literally connected to one another through wave vibrations we are unaware of. At a molecular level, we pass molecules back and forth. Oxygen and carbon dioxide are examples of this: In one minute, what fills my lungs, in the next may be passed into yours.

Science also tells us that we sync up heartbeats with those we sing next to. As a choir director and music minister for so many years, that phenomenon has been meaningful to me. We are more connected than we realize. Yet we live in isolation from one another.

There's a parable about a man who was walking down the street when he fell into a hole. The walls of the hole were so steep that he couldn't climb out. So he cried out for help. First, a doctor walks by, writes him a prescription for his obvious pain and tosses it into the hole before walking away. Shortly after, a priest walks by and the man cries out, "Father, can you help me?" The priest, hearing his distress, wrote a prayer, threw it in the hole, and walked away. Finally, a friend walks by and the man asked, "Can you help me?", when surprisingly the friend jumps down into the hole with him. The trapped man was beside himself: "Why'd you do that? Now we're both stuck here!" The friend said, "Yes, but I know the way out because I've been down here before."

Dear friends, we are a people thirsting for connection, to know someone is in the hole with us. It is in our DNA to seek out that which binds us, outwardly and inwardly. This is not something we can simply throw prescriptions and prayers at. Nor can this need be filled by escaping one another. Peace comes through the practice of presence, of being with, of binding that which has been separated or fragmented. This is the Spirited way of peace.

I want to close with some questions as we think on this:

- Are we working toward the connection of those around us? Are we tuning into the growing isolation of neighbors and friends?
- Do you and I have relationships in our lives which enable us to be our full selves, no matter our flaws?
- Are you and I finding ways to reconnect with nature?

The way of Jesus is a movement toward, not away from. How is it that religion ever became a movement of isolation, one with hard boundaries? Friends, may we lean into the work of the Spirit, toward connection, which is the way of peace. Amen.