

## “PEACE”

John 14:15-21, 25-27

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*Introduction to the scripture reading:* The verses we are reading today are just a small part of a long, long speech of Jesus that is recorded in the gospel of John. It goes on, with only few questions from his disciples, for the better part of four not-short chapters. The other gospels don't include anything like this, so we know it's here because it reflects what John wants us to understand about Jesus. We have no way of knowing if it was really all one continuous sermon or whether John simply presents it that way, having left out other conversations and happenings as less important. What is most significant to know is that the setting is just before Jesus' arrest, after he has washed his disciples' feet, after they have eaten supper, after he has told them that one of them will betray him. So, the cross kind of looms over the scene. There is a hint that a separation is coming, that everything is about to become unmoored. So we might think of the things Jesus says here as an attempt to prepare his friends for the difficult and as-yet unknown things they will have to face. He knows they will have fears and anxieties; He talks about love, obedience, trust, connection, belonging, and – here – peace.

*Read John 14:15-21, 25-27.*

“Peace I give you,” Jesus says, but “not like the world gives you.” Not like the world gives us? I hear those words and want to say that it seems to me that nothing the world – “world” here refers not to nature but to human culture – nothing the world gives us seems anything like peace.

From our fears for our health and for loved ones in the midst of a pandemic... to shock and grief as we hear the numbers and the names of the dead,

from events missed and opportunities lost and plans we've had to give up ... to well-founded concerns about ways the pandemic may be making some of our society's problems worse,

from the economic toll it's taking... to the sad reality that conflict and hate and indifference in our world have not abated,

from the ugly loudness of those concerned only with the personal freedom to do as they please ...to the anxieties that come with loss of routine and social support and activities that keep us grounded,

from our lack of confidence in our leaders... to the ever-growing list of questions we can't answer yet,

... nearly everything about life right now seems to suggest that there is little peace to be had in our world.

In fact, I'd be tempted to say that it's just not possible to truly feel peace at a time like this.

But then I remember Etty Hillesum. Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman living in the Netherlands during the time of the Nazi occupation. Not raised practicing a religion, as a young adult she became a seeker after God. She kept a journal of her spiritual quest, and as the restrictions and deprivations increased, as the threat of violence and deportation became more imminent, she wrote about her increasing closeness to God, about seeing beauty in the world, about being grateful, about finding life beautiful and meaningful. She wrote with compassion for others and a growing sense of calm readiness to, in her words "bear with grace" whatever might come. It was not that she was unaware of what was happening around her, or in denial. She worked as a social worker in a transport camp, caring for people who were soon to be loaded onto trains to concentration camps. And yet she somehow became able to live from an inner place of peace and strength. I have to say that I am in awe of that.

This is "not what the world gives." Oh, there are ways to keep all the anxieties and troubles and horrors of the world at bay.

We can live in denial – pretend it isn't happening, or isn't really that bad.

We can insulate ourselves with the privilege of resources and relative safety.

We can work hard at maintaining an illusion of control.

We can find distractions.

We can look away from the pain of others, refuse to know or to learn what it's like or understand anything about its causes.

We can distance ourselves from those who are suffering and struggling – because they are far away, or somehow different from us, or "not our responsibility."

All of that is tempting, no doubt about it. But denial, distraction, keeping our distance, and so forth are not the same as "peace." They may seem like good imitations but really they are poor substitutes, and what they offer is temporary. They are "what the world gives," not what Jesus gives.

Jesus gives us:

Love one another.

Keep my commandments

Abide in me.

We tend to think of peace as having to do with being somehow *apart* – apart from busyness, or demands, or worry, or conflict, or violence, or people who are annoying or needy or hateful, but Jesus' words about peace are not about apartness, but about connection.

I discovered that if you search the internet for images related to Jesus' words about peace, you mostly get pictures that show one person, alone, sitting in a sunny meadow or on a rock by a peaceful lake. Nice, and sometimes just what we need, but not actually that relevant to this text. Remember the context: fear, separation, coming challenges that will make it hard for the disciples to keep faith and remain in community. Jesus words are for *those* kinds of times... for our kind of times. It's not sentimental. It's not about escape or denial. It's about a way to *be* in the midst of ... whatever it is.

It has to do with knowing – being firmly grounded in - who you are, who you belong to, and what you are called to be. It's not unlike what psychologists call a 'non-anxious presence,' which can help to bring calm and hope to a troubled individual or conflicted situation. Which is exactly what Jesus is offering to us, in himself. Jesus' promise of peace is essentially a promise of *presence*. He talks about that in several ways.

He says that he won't leave us orphaned; in other words, we are to understand that we are not alone but part of the family of God. Included. Accepted. Beloved. This is who we are.

He says that those who love him will always be able to discern his presence.

He says that he and the Father will "make a home" with us.

He says that he is in us and that we are in him.

He says that the Holy Spirit will abide in us, teach us, guide us, remind us of Jesus' words when we forget them, as we might be inclined to do.

And he says all this not to an individual disciple, not to "each one of you," but to a *community* of people who he is asking to remain faithful *together* - to keep his commandments, to love him, to love God, to love one another, to live joyfully, to have courage in a world of fear.

One commentator says that "the gift of peace is bound up with all that makes for righteousness or right relations: love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and thanksgiving." (Hoake, p. 494) True peace will never be only personal.

We are not alone because we live every moment in the presence of Christ, who has promised to be always with us.

We are *also* not alone because we are present to one another in the love that Jesus has declared to be our way of life.

This is the peace that Jesus gives. It's ours no matter what is going on around us, no matter what troubles or sorrows we are facing, no matter how uncertain the future looks.

In these times, it's so essential that we remember that we aren't alone, and why we aren't alone, and what that means for the way we respond to what's going on. We need to resist the temptation to flee, to turn away, to distract ourselves from the pain around us. We need to see,

to know, to honor, to bear witness to the ways our friends and neighbors - our sisters and brothers - are hurting. We need to bring the spiritual gift of presence to this time, even though we can't be physically present. How can we have the courage to do that? How do we do that without falling apart? Because the presence of God gives a peace we can ground ourselves in. Because Jesus himself has shown us what presence means. Because this is what it means to be the body of Christ, the people who belong to Jesus and are supposed to be like him. Because the Spirit accompanies and leads us.

Etty Hillesum wrote about the necessity of "...living one's life with God and in God and having God dwell within." (p. 148) I am struck by the way her words echo Jesus' words.

She discovered, I think, in a time when peace seemed impossible, that peace is found in *presence*. What's more she learned that peace is not merely something to be *found* and cherished, but something to be *lived*. In one moving passage of her journal, she describes what she would sometimes do when she encountered a crying woman or hungry child in the camp where she worked: "I would go over to them and stand beside them," she said, "All I did was stand there, for what else could one do?" (p.156)

Each day as we return again and again to the promises of God, and make the choice to live in God's presence, Jesus can speak through our words and actions, saying to others, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't let them be afraid. You are not alone."

As we approach Pentecost, are we ready to hear again the Spirit of God reminding us again of Jesus' words?

And can we, Jesus' people, in these days,  
                    be present,  
                            bear witness,  
                                    and live the peace that Jesus gives?

Resources:

*Etty Hillesum: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Annemarie S. Kidder, 2009, Orbis Books.

Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoake, Essay in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2

Elizabeth Hakken Candido, "Pastoral Is Political: Near the Cross Was Mary Weeping" posted on [revgalblogpals.org](http://revgalblogpals.org), May 13, 2002