

The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz

Easter II C

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Grace and Holy Trinity Church

Peace be with you....

And also with you

As people who regularly worship together in the tradition of Common Prayer it is easy to forget the revolutionary nature of this simple phrase. For some it can seem trite to greet one another with a sign of peace. For others the response is almost Pavlovian- as one joke puts it: when an Episcopalian watches Star Wars and Yoda says “the force be with you” the Episcopalian responds with “And also with you.” Yet for visitors and people who are new to our liturgical practice, the moment in our corporate worship which is known as “passing the peace” can seem awkward and indicative of the end of the service. Regardless of it feels commonplace, reflexive or odd, sharing the Peace is an integral part of who we are as people of God.

It is something we share not only within our faith community, but with our Jewish brothers and sisters but our Muslim siblings as well. The Peace of God which surpasses all understanding is at the root of the greetings in Hebrew: “Shalom”, in English “Peace be with you” and in Arabic: “As-salamu alaykum”. In the Christian tradition we inherit this greeting directly from Jesus who greets his disciples after the resurrection when they are locked in the house after his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial. After they have learned from Mary Magdalene that Jesus is alive, all conceptions of reality and possibility have been shattered. In total and utter shock they, I imagine, have locked the doors in an attempt to give themselves a moment of security so they can figure out what to do next. Jesus has different ideas. He comes in anyway, locked doors mean nothing to a man who has defeated the bonds of death. And the first thing he says to them is “Peace be with you”

In the New Testament Greek the word used is eiréné (iraynay) which means: one, peace, quietness, rest or tranquility. But when Jesus comes to his disciples proclaiming peace there is more to it than saying “Chill out” or “Calm down”. This salutation is an invitation to come once again to a place of understanding - a place where God’s love, God’s peace, God’s benevolence is once again known, and not just known, but accepted, and not just accepted, but spread as the Good News throughout the world. Despite the real and present dangers that the disciples are living with, once Jesus enters the locked room, despite threats against their very lives the disciples are reminded that the Peace that God promises is greater than any anxiety or fear they will experience. God’s Peace provides more safety than any locked door can.

Jesus proclaims, “Peace be with you” a second time and continues this affirmation of the security found in the Father’s love by commending those gathered to send the love of God out into the world. Sending the disciples into occupied Jerusalem and Judea to spread the love of God seems like a fool’s errand but this is the moment when they are given the opportunity to follow the Risen Christ instead of the Rabbi from Nazareth. If the disciples can face the broken world around them- the nation of Israel occupied by Romans, their Jewish faith torn apart by schisms over law and practice, and a world that seems to be being torn apart at the seams- then they can make the transition from disciples (or followers) to apostles (messengers).

Jesus stands risen from the dead proclaiming the love of God to his followers and he expects them to become messengers by proclaiming the love that reconciles, rebuilds, and stabilizes rather instigating anxiety and fear which divides, shatters and destroys. On the one hand those gathered in the house, know about the Peace of God. They have heard Jesus preach about it. They have listened to and possibly read scripture in which it is a theme. They have witnessed the power of it through Jesus’ ministry.

But until this moment, many of them had not experienced the Peace of God, and in the midst of their anxiety they all wanted proof. All of them needed to see his wounds and touch his skin to be able to move from knowing about Peace, to experiencing Peace. It isn’t just Thomas who needs to see and touch

the wounds of Jesus, even though he is singled out because he wasn't there the first night.

This is precisely what we hope happens when we transition from the Word to the Table in our common worship. Episcopal liturgies which include the sacrament of Holy Communion (Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages, Funerals, and Ordinations) are designed in such a way that we start by the breaking open of Scripture through careful reading and teaching which leads to the shared Great Thanksgiving or Eucharistic feast. However, the transition from word to table comes at the sharing of the Peace. This liturgical moment when we reach out and touch one another, is when we literally move from learning about God to engaging with God through the Real Presence of Jesus. This is when we move from being pupils to being evangelists in our common life together.

“The Peace” of God is the lynch pin which connects knowledge and action. We know of the love of God because we have learned about it through scripture and reflection, but we know the love of God because we have experienced it through thought word and deed. This is why we welcome the newly baptized, confirmed, reaffirmed and received members of a community at “The Peace”. This is why newlyweds greet one another with their first Holy Kiss at “The Peace” This is why “The Peace” is exchanged amongst those who mourn at funerals. This is why “The Peace” is an ordinands introduction to the congregation as a newly ordained deacon or priest, or newly consecrated bishop. Because “The Peace” is more than a hug, handshake or a kiss on the cheek, “The Peace” is a physical manifestation of God’s Peace that we can experience in our common prayer.

So why keep “The Peace” to ourselves? Why keep the knowledge of God’s compassion and mercy a liturgical secret? Why keep ourselves locked away in fancy rooms with stained glass windows and pipe organs? Why keep experience of God’s peace private? Why not go out and share the love of God with everyone we meet?

As ministers, all baptized Christians, are given the same assurance of wholeness, tranquility and rest in God that the apostles were given on the eve of the First Easter, and they were reminded of a week later when Thomas was in their midst as well. That there is nothing to be afraid of. God’s peace is not a precious commodity meant for a select few but an abundant resource intended

for all of creation. The Peace of the Lord is something that anyone who knows and has experienced in their own lives cannot keep to themselves. We try to contain it in worship to a few minutes, but if you have ever been to a Traditional Service at 7:45 or the Port of Grace Service at 5 pm you will know that limiting oneself to a single hug, or hand shake in those contexts is impossible. So to should it be when we go out into the world, in our day to day lives we should be ambassadors for God's peace to everyone we meet.

To borrow a sentiment that is attributed to St Francis of Assisi, we are invited to preach peace at all times and when necessary use words. A smile, a handshake, or a hug goes along way to promoting the Good News of God and Christ. It is a concrete reminder that we are connected one to another and that God is in the midst of us. Sometimes we need to have that physical human reminder that we are not alone.

I have seen this in my own ministry, when I worked with teens who were struggling with identity issues- holding a hand or providing a shoulder to cry on lifted enormous weight off of their hearts and minds. In the Port of Newark when I served as a chaplain, there were times when language, cultural, and religious differences blocked me from communicating in any way, other than a smile and nod in silence, but when that was all I could offer it was accepted and often more than enough. Every week I am blessed to be able to share the Peace which I know and have experienced with you all in the Sunday congregations as well as with the members of the Red Door Ministry on Fridays, it is in sharing the Peace that I am reassured. Even when I am most afraid, anxious and consumed with doubt I know the awesomeness of the Peace of God because I share it regularly with all of you. Every week after being here with you all, I want to share it with everyone and because of you, I strive to live into that for another week.

Peace be with you.

Amen