
PEACE

There are some texts that you can preach on for a full year and not run out of things to say.

- This is one of those passages.
 - *“Those who love ME will keep MY word.”*
 - *“The ADVOCATE, the HOLY SPIRIT, will teach you all things.”*
 - *“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”*
 - *“If you loved ME, you would rejoice that I am going to the FATHER.”*
 - *“I have told you this before it occurs so that when it does occur you may believe.”*

Yet it just felt to me that there is one key verse that gives insight into all the rest,

- or more accurately, two interconnected verses about which I want to talk today.

The first is this, *“Peace I leave with you; MY peace I give you.”*

Peace. Perhaps you can feel your whole body almost sigh with relief and expectation when you hear JESUS say this.

- But why?
- How do we understand peace?
- What do we imagine JESUS means?

This week I heard someone say after the shooting in Buffalo, NY that killed ten people, “This is not who we are.”

- But it was said after that shooting, and one in Laguna Hills, another in Milwaukee, one in Winston-Salem, NC, and a pair in Texas.
- So many, you probably didn’t even hear of all of them.
 - And I couldn’t help but wonder, “Maybe this *is* who we are.”

Too often, I think, we have this idea of peace as simply the cessation of conflict.

- In its 246-year history, how many years do you think the United States has not been engaged in war somewhere?
 - More than 100? More than 50? More than 25? Only 17 years.
- And how about in the 3,400-year recorded history of the world?
 - Only 268 years or just 8% of recorded history.

Clearly, an end to violence would be a good thing.

- Many of us have prayed for peace in the Ukraine, peace in the Middle East, peace in our country, peace in our community, perhaps even peace in our home.

The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, most commonly refers to a person being uninjured and safe, whole and sound.

- In the New Testament, *shalom* denotes the reconciliation of all things to GOD, and especially through CHRIST.
- The peace that JESUS offers is more than the absence of something negative—like war.
 - Indeed, I think it has its own presence and weight.
 - When someone reports feeling “at peace,” for instance, he or she is reporting more than the absence of conflict,
 - but instead, is testifying to a sense of wholeness, even rightness, of and in one’s very being.

- Peace has a sense of harmony with others and the things around you.
 - Peace suggests a sense of contentment, but even more, fulfillment—
 - a sense of that in this moment one is basking in GOD's pleasure.
 - And that can come, even in the midst of hardship, struggle, conflict, and disruption.
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Think, again, of the timing of JESUS' promise:

- it is the night of His betrayal,
- the evening when HE will be handed over to those who hate HIM, and who will take HIM away to be executed.
 - And yet, in that moment, HE not only senses peace but gives it to others.

This peace is a gift from GOD,

- something we sense most keenly when we give over to GOD a certain amount of control of all the things that we worry about or that normally press upon us.
 - Not that we surrender responsibility,
 - but rather that we recognize that there are limits to what we can affect or achieve on our own,
 - and sensing those limits, we place ourselves, our loved ones, our fortunes, and our future in GOD's hands.
 - And GOD's response is to give us peace,
 - a peace that allows us to lift our gaze from the troubles that beset us
 - and to see those around us as gifts of GOD, worthy of our love and attention.
 - This is the peace that passes all understanding.
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This is GOD's response—which brings me to the second element of this passage, really the second half of this verse:

- *"I do not give to you as the world gives."*

You might wonder if the world gives peace at all.

- All too often, you see, the rules of the world are that you have to earn anything that is worthwhile,
 - that you need to look out for yourself,
 - that there simply is not enough to go around,
 - that one is in a constant state of competition with all others for scarce resources.
- The world only seems to offer fear—fear of anyone and anything that is different from us.
 - And as that fear is cultivated and grows, the only answer for some is to try to destroy the thing they fear anyway that they can.

Peace, from this perspective, is at best a break—a moment of rest,

- a brief lull in the fray of everyday life,
 - and the constant need to compete, secure, hoard, and protect.
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But, as we hear of a white man killing black people, let me ask: How many of you are white supremacists?

- I know you and I know that you are not.

Yet what do we do when we see someone who is different than us, someone who is unlike others that we do know?

- Do we measure them by we have heard of a few like them rather than trusting that they, like the vast majority of us, are just trying to get through this life in peace also?

The things that some say about immigrants and people of color only enflame the fears that have been planted within us.

- Let me ask another question: How many of you are native Americans?
 - If you are not, then at some point in your family history, you were immigrants in this country.
 - But not like them, right?

Several times GOD gave instructions regarding care for those who are different, especially immigrants.

- For example, Leviticus 19:34 states, “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your GOD.”
- And in Numbers 15:15: “The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the LORD.”
- GOD is very clear about how we are to treat those who may seem different from us.

JESUS gives differently than the world gives.

- JESUS gives freely, with no expectation of return,
 - only the hope that, transformed by this peace, we might pass it on, giving others the gift we have received.

In our worship services, we have a time where we “share the peace.”

- In some settings, that amounts to little more than a well-intentioned and churchly “good morning,”
 - while in others it’s a more heartfelt liturgical greeting.
- Still, I wonder how often we really sense the depth of GOD’s gift of peace,
 - the promise that no matter what happens, GOD will not abandon us, but is always working for our good,
 - and, through us, for the good of our neighbor and world?

How often do we feel caught up in and by GOD’s peace,

- the promise that GOD loves us more than anything,
- and will hold onto us through all that may come?

How often do we sense GOD’s deeper purpose,

- that we not only experience this peace,
 - but also share it with others?

How many of you need this kind of peace, crave this kind of peace, covet this kind of peace?

- How often have we sought it, only to find it rather illusive?
- How often have we accepted what the world offers as peace, only to discover that it was a counterfeit promise?

Perhaps, though, we might actually become the ones who show that the many acts of violence that have happened because of a fear of those who are not like us do not truly represent who we are?

- Might we be the ones who bring some of God's peace into the world and to those who also crave it?

What if we were to intentionally seek out those who are not like us—at least not on the outside—and say to them, “I'm glad you are here.

- “I'm glad you are part of this community because we need you and the diversity and culture that you bring to our world.
- “I'm glad you are here, because you are a child of GOD and are deeply loved by the ONE who made us and who comes to be with us.”

Today, as we share the peace, even if it is just a wave, maybe we can go a bit deeper,

- to acknowledge that there is something that we deeply desire, but apart from GOD we cannot find.

Perhaps we can move to declare that GOD's peace isn't something you can seek or grasp, but only receive.

Perhaps we can claim, in some small way, that only as we release our grip on the many things that we are trying to hold onto

- do we discover open hands that receive GOD's gift of peace.

And then can we promise to each other in that moment,

- when we are convinced that we can't do this on our own,
- that GOD is still there, offering us GOD's peace,
 - a gift that the world cannot give?

In that moment, let us try to bask in GOD's pleasure,

- in the confidence that GOD loves us and wants to use us for good,
- and then turn to bless those around us with the same gift,
 - saying simply and meaningfully, “The peace of the LORD is with you.”

JESUS gives us peace in a way that no other can.

- Perhaps this week, we will receive it anew and share with all those we encounter,
 - in this place and in the world out there.

May the peace of GOD that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in CHRIST JESUS our LORD. Amen.