

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

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“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.”

The sixth Sunday of Easter...five short and yet very long weeks since we celebrated with jubilation the resurrection. And now the great fifty days are drawing to a close. In fact, if we were inclined to practice astrology, we might say we are on the cusp of the Ascension (which we will celebrate next Sunday) with Pentecost rising. We look back, and we look ahead.

So, too, do our readings today look both backward and forward. Just as they tell us of both presence and absence. The passage Gloria just read us from John's Gospel is referred to by scholars as Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." It has also been called a love letter. And many of us have the bittersweet experience of the very same kind of love letter from someone who knows his or her death is imminent, wanting to say everything that is important, everything we will need to live on. We were all graced to hear the words Steve Kreiser wrote to family and friends before he died, and read so eloquently by Joe at Steven's funeral. A letter full of love for those he left behind, and thanksgiving for the life he had been given. A letter about his love of God. Before my sister died, she wrote daily in a journal for each one of her three young daughters, and for months following her death they could hear her voice as they read the words she chose just for them. Jesus, too, wanted to say everything his followers would need to live on. He promised them that although the time has come for him to depart, he would send them the Holy Spirit to be their advocate and guide. Everything that his friends and disciples know of him and do in his Name will shortly be done in the absence of their beloved Rabbi, and in the very different presence of God the Holy Spirit. He reminded them of who he is and who they are, and are meant to become. Presence and absence, together and alone...

We also heard the great and beautiful climax of an end-time vision...what the completion and fulfillment of God's design for the human community will look like – a new heaven and a new earth – in the Revelation to John. Because of the victory of Christ the Paschal Lamb, the whole creation will be renewed and transformed by the glory of God. What is absent here? Well, many things...The Temple, because there is no longer need for some to be allowed in, while others are kept out. Neither is there need to keep God within the confines of the sanctuary – the holy of holies. There is an absence of both sunlight and moonlight in this new place, because the *glory of God* is the light of the inhabitants. And, while there are still gates into the city, they are never closed because Christ on the cross was victorious over evil, sin and death, and in the new Jerusalem there is an absence of fear because there are no longer

enemies. There are no wars, because the leaves of the great tree can bring reconciliation to the nations. The tree of life, which God, in the story, prevented Adam and Eve from touching when they were banished from the garden, is available to all. And there is abundance for all, and all are loved.

How then do we put together these two images...the humble, touching words of farewell Jesus spoke to his friends, and the grand and glorious and, yes, perfect vision of the new Jerusalem? The new Jerusalem – or heaven, if you will – is a place of community. It is portrayed as a vast and cosmopolitan place. There is intimate, personal encounter with God and God in Christ, and yet it always leads to a generous embrace of the world, which God created and for which Christ died. As one writer says, it is the capital city of the God who delights in diversity.

This heaven is a place of healing. There is the tree that bears fruit not once or twice a year but 12 times...that all may be fed. And those leaves – the leaves that can heal the nations – are medicine for the wounds that separate and scar nations on earth. It is a place of reconciliation, where old and deep antagonisms no longer produce their poison...not to be forgotten, but to be healed...with brokenness giving way to wholeness, and hatred giving way to love.

A place of community and a place of healing. And the new Jerusalem is a place of vision...the light is God's glory and the lamp is the Lamb, and we will no longer see through the glass darkly, instead we will see God in the brilliant light of eternal day and the delightful rest of eternal Sabbath. Community, healing, light...God in Christ.

We do not now live in that great city, or at least it doesn't appear that we do. Given the world we really do live in, here and now, the new Jerusalem might just seem like a fantasy (and sometimes even a hopeless one). But I think we all have seen glimpses of it now and then in our worldly life...and oftentimes we are caught unawares. A glance out the window on a hurried morning can dazzle us with the beauty of an incredible sunrise. Entrenched in the mechanics of Lamaze breathing, we are instantly brought to tears at the first cries of our newborn child. Witnessing the love and courage of the dad who carried his daughter with cerebral palsy through an entire triathlon moves our hearts, even when we are at our most cynical or despondent. The creator of all things, the lord of all time is versatile in giving us glimpses everywhere...if we but leave ourselves open to recognize and welcome them when they occur. And when we do, we are, as the Psalmist says, in awe.

And so it is that into our despair such a world will ever come – or our disbelief that it is even possible – come the words Jesus spoke in his love-letter to his disciples. Jesus had the difficult task of preparing his followers for the imminent time when he would no longer be with them. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he said, and again we hear the wonderful words, "and do not let your hearts be afraid." He promised that God would send the Spirit to each and every one of them – to each and every one of us – that they (and we) will never be alone. Have confidence, he

seems to be saying, that even in the times when you will know pain, and fear, and doubt, and despair, you are *not* alone. The disciples were about to go out into a hostile world, to preach the love of God in Christ. And Jesus wanted them to know they would not be abandoned, but would be held in God's love through the power of the Spirit. God, in the trinity, did not make promises of prosperity or ease or long life – last time I looked, Jesus did not seek, nor find, prosperity, ease or long life. No, Jesus was the incarnation of the love that not only initiated creation, but sustained it and redeemed it, even unto death. Jesus words were an offering of assurance that bearing God's love in God's creation is never done alone.

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.” Not a gift of life without risks, nor a gift of privilege. Jesus offered the *promise* that entering Christ's risen life, here and now, in our stressful, broken, frightening, frustrating lives – living as best we can with love, compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, wisdom, honesty, faithfulness and generosity – will be our participation – our calling – our honor – in building God's kingdom on earth. We will experience flashes of truth and moments of joy when the Light that is God shines as the hungry are fed, and the widows and orphans are cared for with dignity, and we truly and honestly *do* love one another...when reconciliation comes, like resurrection itself.

Underneath both the promise given in Jesus words of farewell and the picture painted in Revelation there is the incomparable richness of the Hebrew word *shalom* – a word resonant with the multiple meanings of peace, safety, fulfillment and joy. *Shalom* is what our lives will be as we grow into the fullness of Christ. How well we see this, experience it, and participate in it depends on how *vulnerable* (yes, vulnerable) and open to God we are...on whether we determine to hold on to the vision of a city transformed...on whether we know that *our* lives, in community, are the living temple of God's presence in a broken world. Knowing this is to know the fulfillment of the peace Jesus gave – the peace that passes all understanding.

If the new Jerusalem is a place of community, healing and vision...why not here? What are we doing to birth and grow community – a community not just of those who are like us – or those we like – but a community that has room for the whole mixed bag of God's children? What are we doing to heal, rather than hurt, in our families, our neighborhoods, our towns and our nation? When is the last time we checked to see if our vision of what is good and right bears any resemblance to God's vision for us? God has given each and every one of us the power to build a little bit of heaven on earth...to participate in “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth...” *Work* for justice and peace. *Forgive* someone who does not deserve it – maybe even yourself. Be kind to someone who looks or thinks or acts differently from you. Listen – really listen, before speaking. Like Paul in the reading from Acts, take the Good News to the people you encounter and let God's gentle hand guide

your actions and your interactions. Practice radical hospitality...not merely to prove you are good at it, but to throw open the gates and make a place for everyone.

We cannot know the same pain of loss at Jesus' death that the disciples knew...and maybe that is why it is so easy to "forget" Christ in our day to day lives. Yet we, too, have received the gift of the Spirit –our Advocate and guide – our comfort and strength – Christ's peace. When you pass the peace with one another today, remember that it is not simply another form of "hi and how are you" but a gift from God you are sharing. When you eat the bread and drink the wine remember that the absence of Jesus in the world has been transformed into the presence of the risen Christ *for* all the world.

In the new Jerusalem, we are told, there flows the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God, and it waters all around it. We are told that all who see God bear God's name on their foreheads. If this river is, indeed, the water of baptism, then we have already been buried with Christ in his death, and we already share in his resurrection. We are already reborn by the Holy Spirit...and we wear God's name on our foreheads because we have been marked as Christ's own forever.

Alleluia, we say, Christ is risen...and he has given us his peace! Shalom!