**Finding the Spirit of Peace**

May 22, 2022, Easter 6

Acts 16: 9-15 Russell Mitchell-Walker

John 14: 23-29

I have been riding my bike to work these past few weeks, working up to every day as my body gets used to it again. It is about a 30 minute ride, but more than that lately as I am still not up to full speed, and some days I feel downright slow but am patient and don’t push myself too much. On Wednesday this week, I was riding to the church, aiming to get there for the 8:45 prayer service. I did not get away as early as I had hoped and Google had told me that there was to be no rain until 11pm that night. It was cloudy, and the road was wet from the rains overnight. Of course, the wind was against me, as it always seems to be, no matter what direction I am going! The first frustration – and I found myself cursing the wind. As I got near the University there was a fog that was also very misty, like a light drizzle, but enough to be like rain. Another frustration. I found myself mad at google for lying to me! Then coming around the other side of the University toward Wascana and joining the path, I see construction on the bridge, and as I get closer, a sign: ‘Cyclists Dismount’. Another frustration, more cursing as this will break the momentum I use to help me get up the Assiniboine overpass which is the biggest hill on the route. Indeed, I had to get off my bike and walk it that morning. Finally, while on Assiniboine and coming to the turn to get onto the path by the creek to go north to the church, there were some cars approaching. I signalled that I wanted to turn, got over into the lane and the cars just kept going. None of them stopped and that was another frustration and more cursing. By this time as I pushed to get up the little hill on the path, having lost momentum again, I found myself reflecting on the anger I was expressing not just in that moment but during the whole ride at all the little frustrations and my reactions to them. I wondered to myself, ‘where is all this coming from? I guess I am more stressed than I thought about the family issues we’ve been experiencing lately’. By the time I got to the church, changed and ready for the prayer service I was almost half an hour late. I could have skipped it, as we had staff meeting scheduled in 20 minutes, but I knew that I needed it, especially the centering, meditation time that I begin the service with. That time helped me to calm my spirit and find the peace I needed for the day, and let go of all the frustrations of the ride, which were insignificant really, but did get to me.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus tells the disciples: “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 is encouraging them and us, to draw on the peace of Christ, in the challenges and stresses they, and we, face and will face. The peace he offers, is different than the peace of the world. The peace they are familiar with is Roman peace, which is experienced through violence and threat of violence. It is peace for the privileged few. The peace of Jesus is the quality of mutual support characteristic of the heavenly world. It is the active pursuit of the good of community. It is about keeping the commandments of love and justice that Jesus proclaimed. Holding this love within us is the kind of peace Jesus is talking about. It is a kind of peace we can experience even when there is conflict in our midst. Christ’s peace can calm our souls even in the midst of conflict or stress. For me I find the centering of breathing and bringing my awareness to my body brings me back to this peace. It helps as I recognize the interconnectedness of everything and the Divine in it all.

Jesus also tells us that God is sending the Holy Spirit or Advocate to teach us everything and remind us of all Jesus said to the apostles. Now the word used here, is *parakletos* which means, ‘to call alongside’. It can paraphrased to “Continuing Presence of Jesus” which is a better translation for English and what John was intending in the use of it. So, the Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of Jesus in and with us. It is tapping into this continuing presence that helps us find peace. And that peace can lead to a wider, more global peace.

This same Spirit, is evident in the story from Acts. A key message of Acts 16, the reading today, is that the peace of the Spirit works through us to break down the barriers, offering, creating, as well as receiving, hospitality. Lydia, in today’s story, is an example of this. Lydia is a Gentile Jewish convert, who upon hearing Paul share the Good News, asks to be baptized.

It is striking that after Lydia was baptized, she invites Paul and Silas to stay with her and had to “prevail” upon them to accept her hospitality. This would indicate that there was some reluctance to do so. Her words are, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." This certainly sounds more like a challenge than a simple invitation. As a woman and a gentile, she is asking them to practice what they preach.

Paul agreeing to stay in her house as the recipient of her hospitality, indicates that barriers which sometimes divided male and female, and divided Jewish and Gentile Jewish convert within the synagogues do not hold among the followers of Jesus. The Spirit of peace and love is at work, breaking down the barriers which separate them - and us - from one another in community: male and female, Jew and gentile, rich and poor. In the end, the barriers are broken down and they accept her hospitality. Lydia is now free to be hospitable and Paul is now free to welcome her as a sister in Christ. I believe it means being open to be present with one another in community, open to experiencing God’s grace in those once rejected.

As Lydia heard Paul’s message, she experienced Christ’s love and peace and wanted her whole household to experience it too, so they were all baptized as new followers of Jesus. The phrase “and the Lord opened her mind” in verse 14 infers that the apostles were following God’s lead, just as Peter had done with Cornelius. I believe the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, which Jesus said he would send in today’s John passage, is active in Paul, teaching him and helping him remember the words and message of Jesus.

Lydia was a women in a time when women were not held in high regard, in fact they were very low on the social scale. The fact that Paul and Silas stayed and worshipped with a community of women, tells us the extent to which these Middle Eastern men allowed themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit in ways that entirely contradicted their cultural conditioning. We already know from Luke’s gospel that women were part of the community of Christ, and were the first who went to tell the male disciples (who were hiding) that Jesus had risen from the dead. When compared to traditional Jewish and Greco-Roman ideas about women, the early church must have seemed radical in the way it welcomed women and featured them as leaders and prophets. The early church had women leaders like Lydia, who, as the first European convert, established a house church that became a centre of the Philippian church. God’s Spirit working through the community.

May we be open to drawing on the peace of Christ, when our hearts are troubled, when we are impatient and easily frustrated. May the continuing presence of Jesus dwell in us and give us peace, as we seek to love Christ and keep his word. May we encourage the spirit of hospitality that breaks down barriers and opens doors to love and hope.