

“Disturbing Peace”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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John 20:19-31

Every time we worship, with rare exception, we exchange the peace, and we do it robustly. We leave our pews and embrace each other. Our narrow little center aisle becomes almost impassable, and I love it. It’s wonderful, and by doing this, we re-live part of the experience the original disciples enjoyed on the day of Resurrection, when Jesus penetrated their secret hiding place, and said, “Peace be with you,” not once but twice in rapid succession, with a third to come later.

The disciples could definitely use a little peace. Peace to calm nerves on edge as they tried to stay alive and free. Peace to quell the confusion caused by recent events. None of them expected all this to happen – Judas’ stealthy betrayal, the midnight arrest, a kangaroo court, and finally the crucifixion. And then Mary Magdalene had returned earlier in the day with the most astonishing news. What to believe, and what was the next step?

And that’s how we think of peace, by and large. We look to peace for comfort, clarity, and solace. We pray for peace to bring an end to the violence of war and abuse. We want peace to overcome the tensions in our world and in our hearts, the worries and little insecurities that keep us up at night; the anxiety that seems to permeate the air we breathe. We hunger and thirst to be filled by God’s peace, but we need to know that being filled with God’s peace can also stretch us.

Peace is a great blessing that brings a sense of relief, of freedom, a new way of seeing things, but right after Jesus passed the peace to his disciples, he said this: “As the

Father has sent me, so I send you.” Now wait a minute. The Father had just sent Jesus to a cross – a cross which he conquered – but a cross nonetheless, complete with plenty of pain and humiliation. Not exactly where any of us would want to be sent. Going where Jesus had gone was just what the disciples had been carefully avoiding over the past few days, behind locked doors. And now Jesus couples the gift of his peace with a mission to go where he went and do as he did. That’s not what anyone had in mind.

“When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” In other words, I empower you. Remember how one of the most provocative things Jesus did throughout his entire ministry was to declare a person’s sins forgiven?

Drove the religious elite crazy, because they believed that only God can forgive sins. There are even situations where Jesus treats a healing as almost an afterthought to the forgiveness of sins. Remember that time when the friends of a paralyzed man tried to bring him to Jesus? It was too crowded to enter the house, so they climbed up on the roof and, to the distress of the homeowner, tore the roof off and lowered their friend down on his stretcher through that hole. Jesus forgave his sins, and that made the religious grandees present so mad that Jesus told the man to stand up, to prove his power, which probably irritated his enemies even more.

So when Jesus gave the disciples power to forgive, he granted them a gift considered much more powerful than just reversing or suspending the natural order through miracles. To forgive sin was considered a whole different category, a transcendent power reserved for God alone. This gives us a clue as to what Jesus meant

when he said, “Peace be with you.” The peace he spread was more than merely the absence of anxiety, more than just a warm fuzzy. Peace carries with it enormous power that comes from a single source.

Notice how Jesus, right before he granted the disciples power to forgive, breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” That Spirit is no passive presence. The Spirit motivates and inspires. That Spirit, the same breath that moved across the waters at the beginning of creation, the same breath that animated Adam and Eve, that breath Jesus poured into the disciples and into us, instills the power to forgive sins, to reconcile people to God, and to restore order to a creation that’s deeply disturbed and chaotic.

That Spirit, that creative force to forgive sin, all of this and more comprises the peace of God. And no one who receives such an amazing gift of grace can be restrained or exercise self-restraint in godly matters. To be sent out as Jesus was sent by the Father is more than a choice. It starts as a choice, but once we make it, it becomes a compulsion. We just can’t help ourselves, because God already is.

Once we receive the peace of God, crazy things will start to happen. We will begin to break out of our confined spaces. We will tear off the lock and exit our hiding places and go into a world that can be mean and hurtful, a world where news of the Risen Christ is desperately needed. Last week’s slaughter in Sri Lanka is just the latest in what seems to be a never-ending series of reminders of how much the world needs Jesus. The peace of God relieves our worry about material prosperity and physical safety. It takes away our concern about what people might think or say, and enables us to proclaim, not only with our lips but in our lives, a faith that many profess but too few practice – namely, a faith chiefly characterized by forgiveness.

If we seek from God's peace only comfort, what we receive will be meagre, because real peace comes through doing of God's will, which can sometimes be upsetting, to us and others. Consider the cross, where Jesus forgave even his tormentors. When we forgive the unforgivable, it hurts. It is a sacrifice to forgive the unrepentant. When we forgive those cast out by society, some people will want to hurt us, and sometimes they will succeed.

But from the cross came life everlasting, and from our suffering will come great blessings, among them joy and peace. It is not suffering for the sake of suffering. Instead, the suffering brought by God's peace comes when we do something as dangerous and as radical and as earthshaking as forgiving another person – even when they don't deserve it; even when they haven't asked for it; even when they're not aware that we've done it.

This is so different from how we sometimes see being Christian. It's more than what we often think, and it can be very hard to serve God by forgiving others, to do the messy work of ministry. It is so easy to try and take the parts of God's peace we want and leave the rest behind, and so hard to receive the fullness of that peace that surpasses our understanding and transports us into a new Kingdom.

But to borrow from the wise sages known as the Beatles, "Got a good reason, for taking the easy way out? Got a good reason for taking the easy way out now?" Are you "a day tripper," "a [Sunday] ticket, yeah?" Of course, the answer we need to give, that we want to give, is always, "No." But for some of us it takes a "loooooong time to find out," because it can be hard to grasp that the peace of God involves more than a feeling.

The peace of God is a way of life, and that way is the way of the cross, because the cross is the only door that leads to resurrection and newness of life.

Think about that when we exchange the peace here in a few minutes. We do it so often that it can become a “Howdy, howdy, howdy” kind of thing, instead of the profound symbol of love it’s meant to be. Think about how you can carry the Peace of God into your home, your neighborhood, your workplace, your school. Your Facebook page! Think about how God’s peace gives you the power to forgive. It’s an awesome responsibility, and a privilege, and the more we exercise it, the more peaceful we are and the more peaceful the world will be. Amen.