

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

Do you remember the first time you got 'left' by someone you loved? At some point or another in our lives, each of us can remember what it felt like to be 'left.' Perhaps it's a memory of the first time we went to school and Mother left us there among all those strangers. It could have been the first time we were aware that a babysitter had come to the house to stay with us while Mom and Dad went away. Maybe it was a best friend who moved away and left us feeling abandoned. It might have been the time that a favorite grandparent or aunt or uncle or even a parent died and left us. And then there are the out-of-order leave-takings...the ones that take us completely by surprise: a divorce or separation that we had never dreamed could happen or maybe it was the death of someone younger than us that we assumed would live far longer than we did, but didn't. We know those feelings of emptiness. We can remember well the numbness and anger that accompanies grief as well as the moments of regret. It's a feeling of being lost. Sometimes we lose our bearings as we try to figure out how to reconstruct our lives in the middle of such confusion. Many times we might have wished to rewind the tape and make the ending come out differently, but we can't.

The gospel scene we walk into today on the 6th Sunday of Easter takes us back in the events that took place on Maundy Thursday. The Scripture passage that we heard this morning is part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse. It covers the verses from Chapter 13:31 through Chapter 17:26 of the gospel of John. It contains all the things that Jesus wants his disciples to know before he dies on the cross and leaves them. These verses in John are Jesus' last will and testament.

Jesus knows what is about to happen to the ones he loves the most. He is shoring them up for what is to be an excruciating and terrifying experience not only for him, but for them as well. Their world is about to blow up. Jesus is busy giving them the roadmap for putting it back together in a different way. In these few chapters in the gospel of John, Jesus tells them...and us...not only what is most important, but what to expect as well. The one thing that will disorient them the most is the loss of the physical presence of Jesus. That's the one thing that disorients any of us when we lose an intimate person in our life.

Jesus has given them his last command: to love one another as he has loved them. But he has more to say about what to expect after his crucifixion. What he tells them is beyond the scope of understanding for any of them at that moment and many of us even now. He tells them that where he is going, they can't go, so they know that Jesus is about to leave them for some reason and in some fashion. They are anxious, of course, about what they are to do in his

absence. Jesus explains to his disciples that he will reveal himself to those who believe in him and keep his word. One of the disciples wants to know how Jesus is going to reveal himself to them, but not to the rest of the world. And Jesus gives them the formula: Those who love me will keep my word about loving one another and my Father will love them and we will come and make our home with them. We Christians are fond of reminding ourselves and others that “God is love and where true love is God himself is there.”

Jesus also tells them that God will send the Advocate after Jesus has gone and the Advocate will teach them everything they need to know and will remind them of all the things that Jesus had said to them. This is the introduction of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who will abide with those who love and follow Jesus. This is the first they’ve heard of the one that will come after Jesus. And then Jesus says a very cryptic thing. He tells them, ‘I am going away and I am coming to you.’ Jesus has already said “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” And Jesus explains that God will send the Advocate in Jesus’ name. So here we get the first glimpse of our understanding of the nature of God in terms of the Trinity.

Jesus must have been seeing some pretty quizzical looks on the faces of his disciples especially since they are not yet aware of Jesus’ imminent death. For all they know, he is simply going to the next village and has decided not to take them with him. Concrete thinking is not unusual for the disciples...and very often, it’s not unusual for us either. They have no real notion that these are Jesus’ parting words. To them, all of these explanations must have seemed to them simply more teaching from Jesus...and teaching that they could not understand. Jesus was preparing them for an event they knew nothing about, although they may have feared it.

After announcing the imminent arrival of the Advocate who will guide and teach them, Jesus says to them, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus knows their hearts will not only be troubled; they will be broken into a million pieces. And their hearts will not only be afraid; they will be terrified. Do you remember that the first thing Jesus said to them after his resurrection? Jesus found them terrified and trembling behind locked doors. He stood among them and his first words were, “Peace be with you.”

The peace that Jesus gives them is no ordinary peace. This peace is the presence of God himself. This is not a passive peace. This is not just the absence of conflict. This is a powerful calm that settles into the soul and drowns every bit of anxiety. This is the peace that is infused with courage which does not mean that the fear disappears. It means that the fear is overcome. The fear is defeated. The fear has no more power to direct or harass. Jesus has already explained to them the relationship between him and the Father and the relationship between him and the Holy Spirit. And he has promised them that he will be with them even after he is gone. “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name,” he says, “there I will be also.” Jesus is present with his believers, so the way to be in the presence of Jesus is through

prayer and communion with other believers. It is in the community of believers that Jesus reveals himself. The peace that Jesus offers is a sense of safety amid potential, if not inevitable, harm. This peace brings with it a sense of comfort and distress is dissolved. Anxiety no longer rules the day. Fear and trembling are no longer in charge. This is a peace that offers courage which is not the absence of fear, but the mastering of fear. This is a deep-seated sense of safety. A sense that no matter what is going on, all will be well.

What is clear in this information that he gives them...and us...in his farewell to them is that Jesus intended for the disciples to feel his peace...this down-to-the-bone sense that all is well and all *will* be well. And that they will feel his presence with them through the Spirit, through the continued teaching that will come and through the connectedness of the community of believers. The peace that Jesus gives to them...and to us...is simply the consequence of the presence of God. It's what happens when God is present. Because God's peace is like no other. It is all consuming. And where you find love, you find God. Jesus explained that he told his disciples all these things *before* he died when little of it made any sense at all because he wanted them to have already heard all of this so that when it did come to pass, they would believe. It's easy to imagine one disciple saying to another, "Oh, *this* is what he meant when he told us all of that!"

It is no accident that in the sequence of our service, we exchange the Peace immediately after we have said the Confession and received the Absolution. We are forgiven and loved and welcomed into the arms of God. All is well and all will be well and we are once again reconciled to God. That peace that we exchange is God's peace. When we exchange the peace with each other we acknowledge not only our own sense of being forgiven but our own willingness to forgive others. Saying "Peace be with you" is much the same as saying "I forgive you for whatever you have done or said that upset me. And all is well between us." That's a powerful statement for us to make to one another and a very healing one. It builds community.

That passing of the Peace is what reminds us of Jesus' presence among us. And immediately after we acknowledge Jesus' presence among us and God's peace within and around us, we come to the rail for Holy Eucharist. We come to Jesus' table to be strengthened, to be comforted, and to be loved and to be as one with Jesus and each other. We come to this table to be in communion with Jesus and all those believers who have gone before us and all those who will come after us as well as those who are here with us now.

For the gift of the peace that passes all understanding we can only say:

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.