

The Peace of God

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Pastor Tom Ford

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

John 14:

[23] Jesus answered him....

[27] Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Some experts say you should never begin a sermon with a joke. What do they know!

Once upon a time, there was a man named Sam, and Sam was a burglar. One night, Sam broke into a house, knowing that the family was away on a vacation. And as he stood in the darkness, waiting for eyes to get used to the gloom, he was aware of a presence in the room. And all of a sudden, he heard a high, shrill voice saying, "Jesus is here!" And he was shocked! He was frozen in fear! And he heard the voice again, "Jesus is here!" Now curious, and he wasn't really a believer, he turned on his flashlight, and turned it in the direction of where he heard the sound, and low and behold there was a birdcage with a parrot in it, and his light shown on the cage, he saw the parrot say, "Jesus is here!" Now regaining his composure and his bravado, he cursed at the bird, and he said, "This very night you are going to be cat food!" And after a few moments, he became aware that, no, there was still another presence in the room. So, he shone his flashlight slowly throughout the house. And he saw there in the corner a big Rottweiler with sharp, white fangs bared at him. The last thing he remembered hearing was the high, shrill voice saying, "Sick him, Jesus!"¹ (pause)

Jesus the Rottweiler with bared fangs is not the Jesus we hear in today's Gospel. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid," says our Jesus.

¹ "Shalom" - Homily of April 7, 2002 by Deacon Ben Agustin <http://www.ckph.org/homilies/homily040702.pdf>

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Our hearts are troubled, and we are afraid. There are serious problems everywhere we turn. Wars are raging. Mistrust is epidemic. Everyone everywhere is divided. Anger is rampant. And good church people are just as susceptible to negativism as anyone else. One time a young Methodist woman was appointed to be the pastor of a small, rural community church. The people of that church had never had a woman minister before. They didn't know what to make of it, and many of them were unhappy and suspicious.

Soon, the woman won them over. She had extraordinary abilities and a deep commitment. She was a natural leader, a good communicator, and they quickly grew to love her -- all except for two crotchety, old farmers who were hard-nosed, close-minded, and extremely set in their ways. They didn't like change of any kind, especially this new-fangled idea of having a woman as their pastor.

The woman was very patient and kind. She tried everything to get close to them but to no avail. They were cool, grumpy and unbending toward her in their crusty old ways. Finally, someone in the congregation said to her, "Go fishing with them. They love to fish, and maybe when you're out there on the lake, they'll get to know you better and accept you. That just might melt their cold, cynical hearts. Go fishing with them."

The woman minister liked the idea, so the next Sunday she asked the two old men if she could go fishing with them. They frowned, grunted and groaned a bit but finally agreed. They said, "We'll meet you at the car at 5:30 Wednesday morning, and if you're late, we won't wait for you even a minute." "Don't worry," she said cheerfully. "I'll be there."

Wednesday morning came. They drove to the lake, got in the boat, pushed out from shore and began to fish. The gruff, old farmers were surprised to see that the woman could fish exceptionally well. She not only caught the first fish, she caught the first five fish. Each time she pulled one in, the old farmers muttered and complained under their breath.

Shortly, a crisp wind blew up. The young woman minister felt chilled a bit, but she didn't want to disturb the fishing of the two old farmers. She said, "I'm feeling a bit cold, so if you'll excuse me, I'll run up to the car and get my sweater." With that, she stepped out of the boat and walked across the water to the shore. As the grumpy, old fishermen watched her "walk on water," one turned to the other and said, "Well, would you look at that? Might've known it ... She can't even swim!"

I have a sneaking suspicion this is not a true story. However, it does offer food for thought. There are a lot of people in this world who, like those fishermen farmers, are pretty miserable. They use all their energy being negative, refusing to see the miracles all around them, unable to

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trust God and one another, and missing out on the *shalom* which is God's desire for each one of us.²

That word: shalom. It's a Hebrew word translated poorly as peace. It means rather when God has everyone and everything in all of creation completely together, completely whole again, completely coalesced into God's will, the way God intended it all to be from the beginning. Shalom. It's what we are praying for one another and our world when we have the passing of the peace during worship.

The best word to remember as a translation of shalom is wholeness.

Listen for a moment to one of my spiritual mentors, Frederick Buechner:

".... Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces

"It is in Jesus....that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness. When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is, and the reason we recognize it, I believe, is that, no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a *vision* of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us....

".... The peace that Jesus offers....is.... a peace beyond the reach of the tragic and terrible. It is a profound and inward peace that sees with unflinching clarity the tragic and terrible things that are happening and yet is not shattered by them....

".... Sometimes even in the midst of our confused and broken relationships with ourselves, with each other, with God, we catch glimpses of that wholeness that is not ours by a long shot and yet is part of who we are....

"In the Ken Burns series on the Civil War there were a number of scenes of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913. The old men came back one summer day, Confederate and Union veterans both, to commemorate the occasion.... The most moving part of it was the reenactment of Pickett's Charge....

Buechner continues: ".... What they saw was that, beneath all the fear and hostility and misunderstanding that divide human beings in this broken world, all humankind is one. What they saw was that we were, all of us, created not to do battle with each other but to love each other...."

Buechner concludes, "You and I live in a broken world-a world shattered by wars, famine, political upheaval. We are citizens of a nation that in all its history has perhaps never been so dramatically confronted as it is now by its brokenness,a nation whose city streets are littered by the bodies of the homeless and a fifth of whose children go to bed hungry at night if they are lucky enough to have beds, a nation that continues to spend billions on defense against

² Rev. Laurie Haller - First UMC - April 7, 2002 <http://www.grandrapidsfumc.org/Sermons/20020407.html>

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the enemy without, when it becomes more apparent every day that all the real enemies are within-poverty, illiteracy, the despair that breeds crime and addiction. As for the church of Christ, no one knows better than the church itself all the ways it, too, is broken, just as no one knows better than you and I know it the brokenness of our own individual lives, both within ourselves and in our relationships with each other.... The question [then] is.... how is it possible in a broken world to become whole?

“Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote a poem called “God’s Grandeur”.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not wreck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

It is our business, as we journey, to keep our hearts open to that, to the bright-winged presence of the Holy Ghost within us until, little by little, compassionate love begins to change from a moral exercise, from a matter of gritting our teeth and doing our good deed for the day, into a joyous, spontaneous, self-forgetting response to the most real aspect of all reality, which is that the world is holy because God made it and so is every one of us as well. To deny that reality is to exist as a stranger in a world of strangers. To live out of and toward that reality is, little by little, to become whole.”³

[Shalom] I leave with you; my [shalom] I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

³ Frederick Buechner, Journey Toward Wholeness.

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Jesus spoke those words long ago in the Upper Room in the City of Jerusalem, a city he wept over for not knowing the things that make for peace, shalom, the wholeness of God.

Jerusalem. The word itself means foundation of shalom – basis for wholeness.

The ancient rabbis tell us how the spot we know today as Jerusalem was chosen. Long ago, Jerusalem was a field tended by an old man and his two sons. When the old man died, his sons divided his property between themselves. One brother had a large family, which helped tend his field. Thus, he became wealthy. The other son had not yet married, and he tilled his land by himself; he was poorer than his brother.

One day, the wealthy brother looked across the fence to see his brother working. He pitied him and thought to himself: "How can I help my brother? He works so hard but sees little profit. I would gladly share my grain with him, but he would never accept my charity. At night I will bring him some of my produce and he will never know that it came from me."

That same day the poorer brother looked into his brother's house and saw him feeding his children. "My brother has such a large family," he thought. "He surely cannot feed them all from his field. I would gladly share my grain with him, but he would never accept my charity. At night, I will bring him some of my produce and he will never know it came from me."

That night each brother brought several bags of grain to the other, but when they woke up the next morning, they noticed that they had no less grain than the day before. For several nights they tried to give each other grain, but each morning they noticed that they were left with the same amount. Until finally, one night, they met in the middle of the field with their sacks of grain on their backs. When they realized what had been happening, they embraced each other and promised to share all that they had. And God, who was a witness to the brothers' deep love, swore that on this very site He would make his home.

Jesus takes the same approach to us, his disciples. When we share our love with one another, we have peace, shalom, wholeness. When that occurs, our hearts are no longer troubled nor are we afraid.

When I was growing up in the church, at the end of every sermon, my Pastor, Dr. Brown, would raise his hands, wait a moment while the congregation stood, and then always say these words from the Apostle Paul, "The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." After that we would sing Amen. So be it! Then we would sit down. And we would always feel a little closer to Jesus, and a little more whole.

So, would you now please stand.

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The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

(sing) **Amen!**

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