



PEACE & COURAGE

John 14:22-29

May 1, 2016
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Picture the scene: after dinner in an upstairs room. The disciples are relaxed and reclining, leaning on each other with their freshly washed feet propped up. The lamps are casting flickering shadows on the walls and columns. (Dirty dishes are still on the table.) They'd had Passover dinners before – every year, in fact – but never like this one. This one was different.

Never before at Passover had a teacher taken his tunic off and knelt with a bowl of water, on the floor, and one by one, washed his disciples dirty feet.

Never before at Passover had the Rabbi poured a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood poured out for you, the cup of the new covenant.”

Never before at Passover had a dear friend and leader calmly and confidently stated that someone – at this very table – would betray him.”

Jesus had hinted at it over the last few years, but it wasn't just a rumor anymore, strange and confusing. It was really happening. He was going to die, and it was finally coming into focus.

The people gathered in this upstairs room are a dubious lot who dropped everything to follow Jesus – tax collectors, fishermen, carpenters, prostitutes – but now they're followers. Now they're disciples of Jesus. And now the one they thought would fulfill all their hopes – the one they trusted with everything – is leaving them. It wasn't supposed to be like that!

Jesus has made it clear that he will be dying – soon. I imagine the disciples were feeling kind of lost in the shock of the moment. Maybe it's finally sunk in.... Their whole lives have been consumed with following Jesus. That's how it worked back then – he was their Rabbi, their mentor. Jesus was their North Star, their guiding light -- without him they will be lost.

And although this night between Jesus' life and the beginning of his death is an extraordinary moment, it's also quite ordinary. The disciples taste one of the most human experiences possible. It's what it is to live in this world: constantly finding ourselves left alone, again and again. To be abandoned before we feel that we're ready.

Like the disciples, muddling through our lives, we, too, face unimaginable trauma and loss, and then, somehow, must survive -- somehow must continue to breathe and to live, even when it feels impossible.

Today's scripture is just a little section of what theologians call the "farewell discourse" between Jesus and his disciples on the night of his arrest. In today's reading, when Jesus explains that he is going away, he says, "I do not give to you as the world gives."

So – how does the world give, then? The world gives us simple gifts like the full moon on a clear winter morning; or the feeling of a sweetheart's hand in yours; or a good cup of coffee after a big meal.

Pretty nice...but so often the world gives us trouble. The world gives us disappointment. The world gives us fleeting relationships with vulnerable or narcissistic people who hurt us or leave us. We live our lives trying to give our all to our relationships, only to see them crumble, leaving us alone and bitter.

We live in a world full of famine and war. We live in a country that was founded and built up on racism and white supremacy. We see our brothers and sisters of color consistently subjected to the violence of a system that says they are somehow less-than.

We live with the feeling that whatever we do to try to fix or heal this hurting world it will never be enough -- that we will never be able to make a difference.

How does the world give? The world gives us crushing trauma. The world gives us the slow, dull, ache of depression. The world gives us grief – the grief of seeing those we love slip away into addiction, slip away into violence, slip away into death that will eventually take every one of us, and always too soon.

Listen to how "The Message" paraphrases Jesus' words: "I won't leave you the way you're used to being left – feeling abandoned, bereft." This world with its fleeting and fragile beauty leaves us feeling like the floor has dropped out from under us – alone, numb, helpless.

But don't you think Jesus knows this when he looks at our lives? And when he looks at the disciples gathered around him in the upper room? Jesus knows they will be filled with fear as they face the world, and still – still he tells them, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you."

Jesus tells his frightened followers that he doesn't give as this world gives. He doesn't leave them the way they're used to being left. He leaves them with peace.

He leaves them with the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth that God will send. This spirit will do many things. The Spirit will "teach the disciples

everything” and it will “Remind them of all that Jesus has said.” And the Spirit will bring the disciples the peace that surpasses understanding – a peace that will allow them to un-trouble their hearts.

Imagine how that must’ve sounded to them. What must this word ‘peace’ sound like to a room full of who are about to watch their leader, friend and teacher be brutally murdered by a violent empire? Foreign? Out of place? But this is what Jesus gives them. What in the world could it mean?

In our terminally independent, individualistic 21st century minds, “peace” often implies a deeply personal meaning: I’ll be ‘at peace’ with myself. I’ll find ‘inner peace.’ I’ll pursue the kind of peace I find in solitude on the mountain, or by the river.

There’s nothing wrong with that, but I don’t think it’s what Jesus had in mind. The Greek word here is *eirene*. The primary translation is, “national tranquility; exemption from the rage and havoc of war; peace between people.” This is Jesus’ parting gift on the night before his execution. Peace.

Later in the discourse, Jesus gives us another hint as to what this peace is like. He tells his disciples, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble but take heart! I have overcome the world.”

So, in the face of the trouble the world gives us, Jesus has assured us that we will have peace and he encourages us to “take heart!” And although “take heart” is a lovely and poetic translation of the Greek, *tharseo*, the actual translation comes closer to “have courage.”

Because Jesus establishes peace in this world, we can have courage, even in the face of everything the world throws at us. When Jesus tells his disciples that he’s giving them peace, he knows what the days ahead will look like for his followers – and the weeks and months, and even the millennia. He knows they will be full of heartache and struggle; oppression, darkness and fear.

He offers peace to us not so that we can hide from the world. He offers us peace so that we can be more able to enter the world even more deeply – that we would have the courage to live fully and boldly as disciples, keeping his command to love our neighbors as ourselves. When everything around the disciples is crumbling, Jesus has equipped them – and us – to keep our faith.

“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.”

On his way to the cross, Jesus is saying, “The world can kill you, and it may very well do so.” Having lived a perfect life of love and justice, Jesus was executed on a cross because standing up for justice is dangerous, and because love is costly. There’s good reason to be afraid. But Jesus says, “Do not fear. Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

What Jesus has given us is a deep peace that we can be confident, no matter how the world looks, that love is stronger than hate; that hope is more resilient than fear and despair; and that light can, and will, and does break through the darkness. Brothers and sisters we are Easter People! We are the people of the empty tomb, a people of resurrection and rebirth.

Do not be afraid. Take heart; have courage. The peace given through the Holy Spirit allows us to live out the final commandment Jesus gave to his disciples: to love each other as he loved us.

In the light of the resurrection, in the peace that the Holy Spirit brings, how should we live? What does the courage of Easter People look like?

We can see it if we just look around:

We can see LGBTQ teenagers – 5 times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers -- daring to assert that they too are made in the image of God.

We can see a Black Lives Matter protester named Netta, who tweeted during the protests that she had to go to church to teach Sunday school because you can’t forget the little ones. The courage of Easter People empowers us to struggle against unjust systems, as well as to invest in those who will come after us.

We can see residents of the central Pacific Marshall Islands – people whose whole country is well on its way to becoming totally submerged thanks to the rise in sea level driven by global climate change. These people aren’t giving in to despair. They’ve chosen to work for climate justice. Loving their ancestors and loving their future generations, these Easter People insist that “We are not drowning; we are fighting.”

We can see people who donate a kidney to a total stranger; grandparents who step up to the exhausting work of raising children whose parents aren’t able to. We see schoolteachers, nurses, and social workers every day, determined to make sure that all people have dignity. If we’ll just look around, we can see a thousand small acts of courage – people taking heart and choosing to have courage in the face of fear.

So, now we are the disciples, gathered in the flickering lamplight of the upper room. We are the disciples living in a difficult world, holding pain and loss and sadness.

But at the same time we are also the disciples at the empty tomb. We have the Holy Spirit in us and with us. We have a Spirit that is always at our back, the very presence of God, as close as our own breath, breathing into us peace and possibility. I know there are many among us who hunger for this peace – who need this peace, even covet it.

When I was little my dad had this vial of mercury – I don't know why -- he was a chemical engineer. We kids were allowed to play with it. One of the properties of mercury is that you can't get a hold of it. You can't grab it. But dad could pour a little bit into our open hand for us to really see it.

The peace of Jesus is like that. We seek it and find it elusive. You can't grab it. You can only receive it. It runs through your fingers. It's only when we release our grip on all the things we are trying to hold on to, that we can open our hands and receive God's gift of peace.

Joshua 1:9 (NRSV) “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Amen.