

PEACE BE WITH YOU

John 20:19-31

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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Three times in this passage from John, Jesus says to his disciples: "Peace be with you." Now on the surface that might not seem to be significant, because "Peace be with you" was the common greeting in those days, like "Good morning" is for us. But if we look a little deeper, we find that when Jesus said, "Peace be with you," it was much more than just a greeting---it was a blessing and a gift to the disciples.

And significantly, it was not a blessing to them as individuals, but to them as a group. All three times that Jesus says, "Peace be with you" in this passage, the word "you," in the Greek, is plural. Jesus was blessing them as a group, a group that was about to be constituted as the church. In other words, Jesus was giving the new church his gift of peace.

Now it's important to note that peace here does not mean the absence of conflict. Rather, peace means wholeness or togetherness, even in the midst of conflict. Peace means unity even when there is diversity. Certainly the early church was extremely diverse, with both Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free; and yet as Paul says in Galatians, they were all one in Christ Jesus.

Probably because of its diversity, the early church was no stranger to conflict. If you want to know how much conflict the church had to deal with, just read the books of Acts, First Corinthians, and Galatians.

One major controversy that could have torn the church apart was whether to admit Gentile Christians directly into the church, or to require them to become Jews first. Paul was on one side of this issue, and initially Peter was on the other side. Now Peter and Paul did not threaten to leave the church if they did not get their own way. Rather, they both hung in there, relying upon the Holy Spirit to guide them and the church. Jesus had given the church his gift of peace, and that gift enabled them to be united even when they disagreed.

Conflict was a given for the church. And yet the church grew and prospered in spite of the conflict, or maybe because of it. Conflict has a way of forcing us to confront the issues, and we grow in the process.

The current Moderator of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly, Joan Gray, co-authored a book with Joyce Tucker entitled *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*. In their book they write: "We believe that today, as in the early church, the Holy Spirit works through the process of conflict to bring about the will of God. Painful though it may be, conflict can help the church grow and become more creative in its life and ministry" (3rd edition, Geneva Press, 1999, p. 159). Peace is not the absence of conflict, but rather the grace to hang in there together, even in the midst of conflict.

This congregation has had conflicts in the past that were so divisive that some people left the church, either because they did not get their own way, or because they did not like the pastor. I trust that if you ever have major conflict again, you will pray that the gift of Jesus' peace will enable all of you to hang in there and work through the conflict together.

We're hearing a lot these days about whether Barack Obama should have left Trinity UCC Church in Chicago because of things the Rev. Jeremiah Wright said in one of his sermons. I don't want to wade into political waters here, but I do want to say that the church is the people, not the pastor. Pastors come and go, but the church remains; and I would hope that church members everywhere would not leave a church simply because they disagreed with something the pastor said in a sermon. It appears that the members of Trinity Church have stayed there even though some of them may have disagreed with Jeremiah Wright. That church grew from 80 members when he first went there to over 8,000, and is now the largest congregation in the United Church of Christ denomination. Jeremiah Wright's preaching is based on black liberation theology and God's concern for the oppressed. Although his preaching makes us white people feel uncomfortable because it sounds racist and even un-American, it is, in fact, within the black tradition of prophetic preaching about liberation for the oppressed. I was connected with the black community and several black churches in Knoxville, Tennessee, for a number of years, so I know something about the culture of the black church. It seems to me that Jeremiah Wright's preaching probably connected with the culture of Trinity Church in Chicago. In any case, the people are the church.

It is only through Jesus' peace that we can live together in unity in spite of our diversity, respecting one another's differences and agreeing to disagree in love. Perhaps the gift that is needed most in every congregation is Jesus' peace.

But the peace of Christ does more than just help us manage conflict. His peace also helps us conquer fear. When Jesus gave his peace to the disciples on that first Easter evening, what Jesus said was very similar to what he had said to them on Maundy Thursday, the night before his death. John records that at the last supper, Jesus addressed his disciples as a group, using the word "you" in the plural. He said to them, "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."

But then three days later, in that same upper room, the disciples were very much troubled and afraid. They had locked the doors for fear that the religious authorities might come and arrest them, too. They listened in terror for steps on the stairs, or a knock on the door, in fear for their lives as individuals and for their life as a group.

And into their midst came Jesus with the gift they needed most at that time for their life together: his peace. Twice that night and once a week later, when Thomas was there, Jesus said to the frightened disciples, "Peace be with you."

There may be times in your life together as a congregation when the gift you need most is Jesus' peace. You have been through some difficult times in recent years

in this church---short pastorates, long interims, financial concerns. But into your midst came Jesus with his gift of peace. Jesus' peace enabled you to hang in there, even when the going was tough, and to face the future unafraid. And now your future looks very bright indeed. Your new pastor is coming in just two months! You have experienced not only the gift of peace, but also the gift of new life.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples, he gave them his gift of peace, which calmed their fears. He then gave them two other gifts: the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of ministry. He breathed on them the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit. And then Jesus sent them forth to do ministry, saying to them, "As God has sent me, so I send you." No longer could the disciples stay in hiding in their upper room with the doors locked. Now, empowered by the Spirit, they went forth to proclaim the good news, boldly and courageously. What a change from the fear that had kept them hiding behind locked doors! From cowardice to courage, from panic to power.

Jesus has also given you not only the gifts of peace and new life, but also the gifts of the Holy Spirit and ministry. Jesus commissions you to go forth into the world, empowered by the Spirit, to witness boldly and courageously to the good news of Jesus' resurrection. May God go with you and bless you. Amen.