

**A Peace of Presence**  
(Philippians 4:4-7)

Those of us who grew up or became “of age” in the sixties heard a lot about peace. The conversation began in the early sixties with the civil rights movement and continued on into the seventies through the Viet Nam war. There was always so much conflict associated with the conversations around peace I often wondered then – and still today – if we ever really understood the meaning of it all. That is today do we really understand the meaning of peace.

Peace is an important theme during Advent. Historically and biblically we associate the coming of the Messiah with peace. We sing about it in seasonal carols and hymns – peace on earth and goodwill toward men and women. Throughout time folks have written songs about peace and talked about peace, even fought wars in the name of peace, if that makes sense. But what does it all mean if in the end there is still no peace?

If we were to take a poll, would we all agree that peace on earth today is possible? I don't think so. Throughout biblical history and beyond it seems there has never been a time of peace, at least the way we understand peace. This begs the question of whether or not we understand the real meaning of peace on earth. Please pray with me.

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God, whose peace in our lives

surpasses all human comprehension. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed so that we might know the true meaning of peace. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

As I prepared for this third Sunday in Advent and the theme of peace a question came to my mind. “What is the peace of it all?” This strange question kept running through my head – you know – like a catchy tune that you keep humming under your breath for no good reason – until it drives you crazy. But this question got me to wondering if peace might just be a perception and not a real and tangible thing. Peace, I thought, might just be more of a state of mind rather than an actual state of being.

Then, while reading St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, this strange question slowly began to make some sense. What is the peace of it all? In writing to the Philippians, Paul refers to peace as being something that “surpasses all understanding.” This, I thought, seems to indicate that peace might be a figment of our imagination. If it surpasses all understanding – all human understanding – then it must be something that we cannot ever hope to understand or achieve. Peace must be beyond our ability to grasp. Peace is starting to sound more and more like a perception rather than a real thing.

*Webster's College Dictionary* defines peace as the “freedom from war;

a cessation or absence of hostilities between nations.”<sup>1</sup> It’s also described as being “freedom from anxiety, annoyance and dissension; living in a state of tranquility.”

Living in a state of tranquility? Free from anxiety? Could peace then be a perception, something that is more philosophical than practical? In my life I’ve lived in five different states from Arizona to Illinois. In all that time I have never heard of any state of tranquility, let alone lived there. Perhaps peace is something so abstract as to transcend all understanding. If this is true then we need to change the way we think about and define peace.

Paul gives some excellent advice to the Philippians and to us as well when he says, “Be joyful with God. I tell you again, be full of joy. Let everyone know you are peaceable people. After all, the Lord will be here soon. So, don’t get anxious about anything. Instead, let God know all that you need. Pray to him with a heart full of thanks. God’s peace is greater than everything we know. With Christ Jesus at our side, his peace will guard our minds and hearts from worry.” That’s Philippians 4:4-7 paraphrased in *The Message*. It sounds a lot different from what we heard earlier.

Christians throughout the history of the Church have expected Jesus to come soon. At this time of year, we expect him at Christmas as well as the end of time. Our expectations can be anxious or joy filled. Paul tells the Philippians that they can choose to spend their lives worrying about everything – being anxious – or they can be joyful, gentle, peaceable folk. We have the same two choices today,

particularly as we prepare to receive the Messiah on Christmas Day.

That first way – being anxious and worrying – leads to all sorts of problems, especially in our relationships with others. The second way – being joyful, gentle, peaceable folk – seems like a much better choice because joy is never assertive or destructive. It’s like that song “Don’t worry, be happy” kind of attitude. Paul tells us that being joyful and gentle folk has its roots in a peace that transcends the limitation of the human mind and heart. So if we want to experience God’s peace, we must turn away from anxiety and open ourselves up to his presence – to God’s presence.

The key word or operative phrase hidden in Paul’s letter to the Philippians is interpreted as the need – our need – to not be anxious about the future, but to be open to the presence of God in our daily lives, right now, today. We need to let go and let God be God – to recognize that we are not in control. Only then can we have a vision of what true peace looks like.

We have to look beyond our own struggles and problems; even beyond the struggles and problems of the world in order to understand the true meaning of peace. Conflict clouds our perspective to the point that obstacles to peace are all that we see, making it impossible for us to have a vision of peace. It’s like we let those obstacles define peace for us. Peace then would seem to be the absence of those obstacles.

But we have been conformed to a more linear way of thinking about peace. We have allowed the world to define peace for us. God’s understanding of peace, however, is not linear but circular. Our way of thinking about peace is linear – like black is black and white is

---

<sup>1</sup> *Webster’s College Dictionary* (Copyright © 1995, 1992, 1991 by Random House, Inc.), page 993.

white. The divine or circular way of understanding peace means accepting that God is not predictable – that peace is not black or white. Peace is not simply the absence of hostility or conflict.

Frederick Buechner has a more circular understanding of God and peace. Looking through a different lens, Buechner gives us another perspective on what Paul means by the “peace that surpasses all understanding.” Buechner says that, “When Jesus spoke of peace he was not talking about the absence of struggle, but the presence of God’s love ...”<sup>2</sup> within that struggle.

Peace is not the absence of struggle and strife. Peace is not the absence of trials and tribulations. Peace is not even the absence of conflict and war. These things – struggles and strife, trials and tribulations, conflict and yes, even war – are all a part of God’s created order – deeply rooted in our flawed human nature. Some people believe we inherited these flaws from Adam and Eve as they disappointed God in the Garden of Eden. These flaws are nothing more than character traits that will always define us as human beings.

Paul tells us we should work for peace because it’s the one way we can let our gentleness be known to everyone – to let the world know that as Christians we are peaceable people. Peaceable folk, after all, are people who accept the peace that Jesus spoke of – God’s love made real and present in the world. By working for peace we share that love with the world and our gentleness becomes genuine.

So peace has little to do with struggle and strife. Peace has everything to do with God’s love made

real in the world through Christ Jesus. Peace is not about us. It’s not about men negotiating treaties and accords, or soldiers laying down weapons, or nations disarming. Although these would be good and desirable things, they are not likely to happen anytime soon. These are things that are beyond our grasp, at least for the time being. But God’s love is not beyond our grasp. God’s love is present and real in the world now. God’s love is a peace of presence, the peace Jesus spoke of.

God’s peace of presence is embodied in the love that did come down at Christmas. And that love still comes down at Christmas and peace comes with it. Take Paul’s advice. Slow down and don’t be anxious about anything. Take more time to enjoy the season. Embrace the reason for the season – the coming of peace into the world; peace that goes beyond our simple understanding. Let Jesus bring to you the gift of peace – the gift of God’s deep and abiding love for you. For it is most certainly a gift. Make known your gentleness. Make room in your hearts for God’s peace – God’s love – made present in your life through the Christ child.

And share the gift of God’s peace with the world. Share your gentleness with the world. Because you know that gifts have greater meaning when they are accepted with grace and humility and then shared in the same way.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. (Copyright © 1973, 1993 by Frederick Buechner), page 83.