



Sunday May 22, 2022
John 14:23-29 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Last week I was finally able to break away for a little vacation time. However, we didn't have any exciting trip plans, instead, my time off was filled with early morning trail runs, swimming at the Y, moving a ridiculous amount of mulch around our yard, building a kitchenette in our lower level, hanging some artwork for my wife, doing laundry, and cleaning the house and garage. Now, I don't know about you but in my world, these are things that bring me peace.

At least I like to think of them as peaceful moments in life. When all seems right with the world. When a sense of calm fills your heart and mind. When you're not stressed about everything you have to do or everything going on in your life. Peaceful moments that sometimes come at odd times and in odd places. Maybe it's watching a child playing and maybe it's just staring at the sky as the clouds float by. Peaceful moments that are sometimes few and far between. Peaceful moments that are shattered by our worries and all that causes us to lie awake at night. And just like that we're thrust back into reality.

So, what is it that troubles you? The stress and demands of life? Every unfinished task on your list? Or is it that someone you love is sick or suffering? Maybe it's the fear and anxiety of an uncertain future? Whatever it is, it can be overwhelming at times. And then I wonder, where do you go to get away from it all? Because far too often people go to all the wrong places. The bottom of a bottle, pills on a shelf, or an inappropriate website. Maybe it's online shopping or gambling that helps you feel better? And while you may find a temporary fix, something that brings you relief for a time, it won't be long before you're searching again. Always seeking but never finding. And too often these things leave us feeling even more shame, guilt, and regret. Where then do you go to find true and everlasting peace?

Well, this week's gospel couldn't have come at a more perfect time because lately with the growing divide in politics, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the news of yet another racially motivated mass shooting, the rise in coronavirus cases, and to top it all off a baby formula shortage – I've been thinking about peace and what it means to me and what it means for all of us.

I have to confess, I've been increasingly missing our time of sharing the peace in worship more and more because the very word peace and the phrase, "peace be with you" carry so much power and blessing. And yet, at times I find little comfort in them because they're so flippantly overused that their meaning gets watered down and their depth becomes diminished.

The words of this morning's gospel text were spoken by Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion and Jesus has just told the disciples that he's leaving, and that they can't follow him. Then he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And I'm guessing their reaction was the first century equivalent of, "you're kidding me, right?!"

Do not be troubled? Do not be afraid? What world was Jesus living in? Look around! Division, conflict, economic struggle, people out of work, people without food, political fights over immigration, health care, racial and gender equality. And we're not supposed to be troubled? For crying out loud, what's not in trouble? This is what makes Jesus' promise of peace so difficult to take. Peace is just what it feels like we're missing right now. Peace, after all, would bring a halt to all this conflict, and end to all this chaos, the conclusion of all our waiting and wanting and worrying. Right?

I've typically thought of peace as the absence of something negative – the absence of war, or disagreement, or fear, or anger. And the first definition in the dictionary seems to support this view: "peace: freedom from disturbance." But it occurs to me on reading and re-reading Jesus' words to the disciples that maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe peace isn't an absence of something, but instead is its own presence. Maybe peace is something, all on its own. Maybe it creates something positive, makes something wonderful possible, not just reduce something negative. Maybe this is what Jesus means by saying, "My peace I give to you. I do not give it as the world gives."

If that's so, and if I'm willing to question the way I usually think about peace – then maybe I should also call into question my sense of faith. I think I tend to operate with a sense that our human problem is that we have within us a need, an awareness of our lack, a restlessness, a hole. But I suspect that along with that picture of our human condition comes with it a correlating picture of how God responds: God fills that hole, meets that



Sunday May 22, 2022
John 14:23-29 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

need, fills in what we lack. In one sense, I think that's true. But I'm just not sure that means that once we come to faith everything is suddenly okay, that we're no longer aware of our need or lack or hurt or brokenness. Or, at the very least if I'm being honest, that's not how I experience the life of faith.

Faith, when I think about it, doesn't so much take away all the difficult things in life as it makes them bearable. And it's actually a little more than that. Faith doesn't take away the difficult things in life, it just keeps them from dominating and defining who we are and the possibilities around us. It's like these things – our needs, wants, and broken places – they're still accurate descriptions of us, at least parts of us, but they no longer define us.

We are more than what's missing. We are, as Paul says and Revelation promises, a new creation. Faith makes this possible. Faith understood not as some divine plug for the hole we each carry around inside of us, but rather as an urgent call to be more, to live and love more, to share more because there is so much more that God desires and designed for us. Faith doesn't promise an end to the tremors in our lives but enables us to keep our footing in the midst of them.

I think that's what Jesus is talking about. After all, the Holy Spirit he promises comes as the Advocate – the one who comes to our defense when we're accused, and the Comforter – the one who will not leave our side during trouble. When we understand things in this way then there's nothing about Jesus' words that would suggest either that he's promising us an end to problems or that he's inviting us to ignore them. Rather, he promises peace – not merely the end of difficulty but instead a confident expectation and hope about the future in spite of it.

Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he thought the world would end tomorrow, and he replied, "I would plant a tree today." That's not optimism, but hope; not simply a lack of fear, but courage; not only the absence of difficulty, but peace – Jesus' peace, a peace the world cannot give.

Peace in the Bible is an all-inclusive, all-encompassing word. In the Hebrew Old Testament, it means wholeness of a person; of the human race; of the whole of creation. It means well-being, good health, material prosperity, social and political justice, right relationships with God and other human beings.

In the Greek New Testament, peace also means the unconditional, eternal gift of Christ to his followers in every time and place. That's why he does not give peace to us as the world does, because for the world peace is often conditional, fragile, temporary, and frequently reduced to mean only the absence of struggle. Worldly peace is never a gift – there are always some kind of strings attached. And there are certainly no promises that worldly peace will last forever.

However, with Christ's peace there are no strings attached; and there is the wonderful promise that it will last forever. Peace, in the New Testament sense, also means salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation between God and humankind as well as between human beings with each other – whether Jew or Gentile, black, brown, or white, male or female, rich or poor. It also means the whole world being reconciled with God. Peace, in this New Testament sense then, is the power and presence of our risen Jesus Christ with us in the Word and sacraments; in prayer and the study of the Bible; and in the daily routines of our lives. Peace is also the Holy Spirit in our lives as friend, comforter, counsellor, teacher, and healer.

Above all else, it is this profound love of God that Jesus has made known to his disciples and that the Holy Spirit continues to make known to us. The gifts of health, contentment, wholeness, security, friendship, reconciliation, and love belong to each one of us thanks to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thanks to his gift of peace.

It is because of this divine peace that we can go into the future assured that we are never abandoned; trusting that Christ's peace will always be with us as a gift to reassure us and give us confidence in our times of struggle and chaos, and amid painful loss and grief. And it is for this gift my dear friends we say thanks be to God. Amen!