

*John 14: 23-27*

*"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 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."*

+++++

## Deep Peace

I've been struck in the last few weeks by the stark contrast between the ongoing layer of anxiety still hanging over our city after the Marathon bombings, and the astonishing beauty springing forth everywhere around us. Warmer days. Trees blossoming. Tulips tall and radiant. I want to spend hours in the Public Garden, with its graceful walks, the children laughing astride the duckling sculptures, the manicured lawns trimmed and seeded. I'd like to escape into that beauty on a sunny day like today.

But I know that life is not so well manicured for many of us, despite outward appearances. Even before the bombings, life wasn't springtime everywhere. It never is. Many struggle with illness or their jobs. People we know have cancer or have died. On Easter Sunday when our church was brimming with bouquets and top hats, for some of those who joined us – and I'm sure for some who stayed away – their sadness and strain was profound. They couldn't join our anthems of praise, our proclamations assuring victory over death.

How do we live in this conflicted world? Of winter and springtime. Of Easter and Good Friday. Of death and peace.

+++++

Jesus and his disciples knew about life's harsh reality, too. Jesus may have talked about the lilies of the field, and God's love of each sparrow, but he lived in the grinding poverty of Palestine's peasant class, in a country under siege by an occupying army, where those blind had to beg, and those with skin lesions or mental illness were banished, untouchables. How was Jesus *ever* credible, meshing lessons on love and peace with the worst heartaches of our lives?

+++++

I tried to imagine being with Jesus, as one of his followers, when he said the words from the Gospel of John, read today by Cathy.

If it were today, Jesus would be someone who keeps doing and saying things that capture our attention. In today's parlance, we've been reading his column in the newspaper, finding surprising wisdom there, fresh ways of thinking about tough issues. "Did you catch Jesus' piece in The Times yesterday?" we're asking. Some of us download his podcasts to listen to as we walk to school or take the T downtown.

He's someone worth following, paying attention to. So we're here again today, listening, and he says these things:

"Those who find me worth following will act on what I've said. Do what I've been doing. Love each other. Live into it, try it.

"This I promise," he continues. "God will keep loving you. When I'm gone you won't be alone. God will send you a new spirit, as a teacher of new things you need to pick up, as a reminder of what you've already learned. The fresh spirit will be an advocate for you, cheering you on; a counselor, listening and offering a wisdom; and a comforter, with you in times of deep sorrow and despair. We'll build a home within you, if you wish – always with you.

"I also will leave behind for you my peace – you'll inherit it. It's not the kind of present that we tend to get in our world, something that can be snatched back. This peace stays with you, no matter what. It's also not peace the way we usually think of it – a slow rest, or war ending. My peace isn't freedom *from* conflict; there will always be conflict. My peace is a deep peace that gives you strength right in the very midst of the conflict. I'll bequeath my peace to you so you have that after I'm gone."

And then Jesus finishes, the podcast ends. It's part of what scholars call his "Farewell Address." As John will transcribe it later, Jesus says these words:

*"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*

*"...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, will teach you everything, remind you of all that I have said to you.*

*"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."*

+++++

Initially, for me, what Jesus has said is *not* comforting – not if I've been regularly reading his column, or listening to his podcast. Because I've heard the bottom line: Jesus is leaving. Despite all that talk of peace, I'd be more panicked than peaceful.

I hate it when people leave me. I hate being left.

Who doesn't?

Some of us have been the spouse "left behind" by death or by divorce. We felt the bottomless grief: days too long, chairs too empty, the other side of the bed too cold. And just when we seem to have gotten past the pain, and can face people again, another memory gets nudged, and the scab is broken open. We still bleed.

Some of us have been a child left behind. Parents who died or divorced or didn't care. The bewildered child, young or not so young, who doesn't know where she or he can feel safe. To whom do we turn when thunderstorms crash or the boyfriend is cruel or the key test is failed?

Some of us have been friends betrayed, sheepishly waiting at the restaurant when no one shows; the person mocked for what we wear or say; the gullible one let go from the job when we thought we'd been assured security.

We've all been left behind too often in this world to just shrug it off, as if it were nothing. Not if we're being honest.

That has to have been how the disciples felt, when Jesus said he would soon be leaving them.

+++++

In times like this, we *do* yearn for some peaceful place, don't we? Jesus got that right, our craving for peace.

We want to crawl under warm covers. To lose ourselves in things we know well or that require no thinking. We go for drinks with friends or maybe drinks by ourselves. We eat ice cream or pasta or buy lovely clothes or lovely furnishings or lovely music or art. We do or buy the things that seem to make for peace, at least for a while.

But deep down, we know the difference. When we sit quietly, and let our tumbling thoughts still, we can tell if our inner calm is ocean deep or surface thin, whether our appearance of having it all together is a veneer that can be scratched easily or whether our peace is solid to the core. We know the difference.

Jesus knew the difference, too, and knew that all of us need some help. It is the rare man or woman or young person who knows peace the way Jesus seemed to.

So in today's lesson, in face of the realities of life, including the very painful separation Jesus is going to have from his disciples, Jesus begins by making us promises. They aren't the promises that we might think we want: that we'll be

physically secure, that our loved ones won't leave us, that we can rest from our labors, that all wars will cease.

No. Listen for his words. Rather than promising us a physical space where we will always be safe, a pristine, secure hamlet in the world, or a fortress behind locked gates, Jesus says God will build a place of peace within us. Inside us. Which no outer forces can ever breach, even if they get to our bodies. A *soul sanctuary* built by God within our hearts.

Rather than promising that we'll never be left behind by any of those we love, Jesus says that God's *Spirit* will never leave us. The Spirit will be our stability, like a trustworthy friend who stays, present during our times of deepest need.

Rather than promising an easy peace, Jesus offers a peace discovered through action. Rather than vacation, Jesus offers the refreshment that flows from loving the unlovable, standing up for justice, supporting those in deepest need. Peace and acts of love are intertwined, each unknown without the other. A promise of peace when we act in love.

You see, rather than promising a peace that is an *escape* from conflict, Jesus promises a way of life that lets us live even *amidst* conflict.

The deep peace of Jesus that he passes on to us -- as one Greek translation suggests-- that Jesus "leaves" to us as our inheritance, is *His* peace, Jesus' very own peace, now ours. "My peace I leave with you," he says. Jesus' peace is completely braided with Jesus' way of living in this Power of Love known to many of us as "God."

To enjoy Jesus' promise of peace, in this chaotic and painful world, we practice living the way he did and see what we discover.

+++++

What have you found? Have you ever given away love, drawn from the very bottom of your well, to a child, or parent, or friend, and then -- *then* -- become aware of some new spirit in you, as if another is alongside you pulling the rope, too. Has a calm settled over your weary shoulder, or light seemed to fill the room where you are? Several of you have told me about these moments in the last two months -- real enough to keep you returning here, even in our world of pain. I've known these times, too.

This is why we come to church, to gather and remember these times together. All week long we hear of what is wrong with us and our world, and as the days pass we grow more anxious, convinced that we are on our own, alone in a threatening world. We grasp and cling for what we hope will keep us afloat, even if we may drag others down.

But here – in this place – we tell week by week of a deeper peace. One intertwined not with greed, but with generosity. One supported not by selfishness, but by giving. One that doesn't try to escape harsh realities, but teaches us how we may live in the very midst of them, and still remain whole, knowing the deep peace that can never be taken from us.

Today we gather around a table where we will be fed again, bread and wine to fill us, as surely as the Spirit does, peace to be given to us, as deep as Jesus' own.

Hear me clearly: Pain is genuine. Tears are justified. God's peace is not another an empty platitude or worse, a demand sometimes heard in churches that we must be joyful when our beloveds die, because they are in heaven.

No! Jesus himself wept when his friend died, Mary and Martha's brother. Jesus wept real tears of agony.

But this promise is true: God can carry you even through that grief, to the other side. Hold on! Hold On! You are not alone! God will always be with you, slowly building reservoirs of deep peace and hope again within your soul. Peace that cannot be taken away.

Today we gather around a table where we will be fed again, bread and wine to fill us, as surely as the Spirit fills us, our sanctuary of the soul. We will receive peace gifted to us, as deep as Jesus' own. Come and receive it again, each one of you.

It's your inheritance, promised to you, already yours.