

Finding Peace with God

John 14:23-27

Jesus answered him, '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.

Well, Happy New Year. I know that we're exactly one month away from what we as a culture claim to be New Year's Day, but in our Christian calendar the beginning of Advent marks the beginning of a new Christian Year. This observance goes back to the fifth century C.E. and its traditions include fasting three days per week throughout Advent; some more devout Christians fasted seven days per week. I'm not sure if this was an *absolute* fast, meaning no food at all for the entire period of Advent, but it was a common practice, **and I would highly advise you to practice some form of fasting this month** as well as regular fasting throughout the year. This is a spiritual exercise that too many Christians have fallen away from, and I believe the effects of our spiritual lack of discipline are easily seen not only in our own lives but in the Church and in the world at large – far too many Christians live lives that are fraught with the same kind of chaos that is found in so many non-religious households, and Christians spend more time in church praying for mercy than they do celebrating the ways God is working in their lives. Prayer, worship, scripture study, Christian fellowship, and fasting are all ways to improve our spiritual health, which keeps us walking on the paths of righteousness.

You should begin a fast by prayerfully considering the purpose of your fast – which should not be to lose weight but rather to glorify God in some way. Your purpose may be to help you focus upon the suffering of others, like those who don't have enough to eat or don't have clean water to drink. A fast should prompt you to take action to relieve their suffering. My fast this Advent will be about praying that we as a church will give more attention to God and will seek God in truth, which will inevitably drive us to self-understanding. As John Calvin observed, "The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie." (John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.2-3), and our knowledge of ourselves cannot be true unless we endeavor to know God. My observations both within myself and outward to the world at large lead me to believe that so much of the world lacks any true understanding of God, and thus we really don't understand ourselves, which means that we really don't know what we're doing most of the time. "Father, forgive them; they know not what they are doing," Jesus declares as he is being tortured most horrendously. We are quite good at torturing ourselves and others most horrendously, maybe not by slow crucifixion but by our failure to know God and thus to know ourselves. Not knowing God means not really knowing ourselves, and that leaves us confused and anxious, and "not knowing what we do."

And so we come to the theme of today's worship service, the title we give to that first Advent candle: Peace. True peace. God's peace. In our state of confusion, we can never find true peace, so instead we have created our own concept of peace. Witness a couple of weapons that have been so inappropriately named, the "Peacemaker" pistol from the 1870s and the "Peacekeeper" missile from the 1980s. We should find ironic humor in these names because the way these inventions go about achieving "peace" is through violence, by *killing* others that somehow obstruct some *order* that we desire. We attain our peace by destroying whatever it is that interferes with our sense of security. And such a means of attaining order always leads to hatred by those upon whom such weapons are used. We can argue about ideologies and democracy and injustice, but if you have killed someone's brother sister, son or daughter, mother or father, husband or wife, no one will want to hear about your ideologies or your "good intentions." No one will believe that the end justifies the means if the means involves killing. No one will look upon the hurt and the harm that has been inflicted and say that peace has been achieved.

This is not the peace that Jesus describes when he tells his disciples, "My peace I leave with you." The kind of peace that Jesus leaves his disciples is nothing like the worldly peace that his disciples recognized, what his disciples knew as the "Roman" peace which was enforced by armies and was nothing more than a threat that if you don't do what we tell you to do, and pay us what we order you to pay us, we will kill you...or worse, as they did to Jesus. We will cause you to suffer in the worst way and die publicly as an example to anyone else who would disturb the peace that we are imposing upon you – this is one of the tragic consequences of not knowing Jesus as we should is that we distort the message that he brings us. How many Christians fail to understand why Jesus was murdered; Christians don't even use that term "murdered" or "tortured" anymore – we prefer to say he died on the cross and not even think about the ones who MADE him die. Jesus was murdered, and before he was murdered he was tortured. **And Jesus was tortured and murdered because he was disturbing the peace**, the Roman Peace which demanded that he give his allegiance to Rome and not God, and the religious leaders believed that defending Jesus would put them at risk of being tortured and murdered as he was. Jesus was murdered because the brand of peace that he advocated was not a peace that involved coercion or violence. **It was the peace that only comes from laying our lives before God, giving ourselves to him wholeheartedly.** And the fact is that the further we are from God the more turbulent our minds and our lives are; the closer we are to God the more true peace we experience.

And the way we grow closer to God is simple, but it is often painful because we have not been forthright in seeking God. We pray to God in times of personal crisis – like I would pray to him before a pop quiz. And once a crisis passes we go back to life as we have been living it. Too often we've sought God like we seek Tylenol for a hangover. We want immediate relief, and once we feel better we see no need for God anymore. But what about the problem that caused us to seek the Tylenol in the first place? In the nine years that I've held early morning prayers at Bethel I've had a handful of people join, and all of them because they are going through some personal crisis. God is faithful, and helps them through that crisis, and once the crisis is resolved they find no need to continue coming. God has fulfilled his purpose in my life, and I can go back to my life, and perhaps I've gained enough wisdom to prevent the same thing from happening again, *but what about the next crisis? What about the next incident that is going to rattle us and deprive us of peace?*

We have very often seen “church” as a path to peace in our lives, as a way to make ourselves feel okay in terms of our relationship with God, and we seek a church that makes us feel comfortable thinking that must mean we have a comfortable relationship with God. Let me tell you; there are plenty of churches that will make you feel comfortable about whatever you do, but that does not mean that God approves of what you’re doing or what that church is doing.

Are we going to go through life just stumbling along blindly, feeling fine until we bump into a wall or fall into a ditch? If we don’t get to the root of the problem we’re gonna need more than Tylenol the next time. The trouble is that if we keep going to God for Tylenol we never get to the root of the problems that brings on the headache to begin with. What’s worse is that longer we continue on our path away from God, the harder it can be to be completely healed of our illness. We develop bad habits that become hard to break, and we just keep needing more and more Tylenol. You know I’ve been playing guitar for over twenty years, but if I really want to be an excellent musician I would need to un-learn some of the ways that I have been playing out of habit. I’ve been lazy. I’ve been holding the neck in a certain way that has affected the way the muscles in my fingers work, and for me to play as a professional, I would need to change my posture and the way I hold the guitar, and then I would have to suffer some pain as I learned new “riffs” and techniques. Rather than learning proper technique I’ve just tried to “sound good” with the songs that I’ve chosen to play. As a consequence it would be more painful for me to play correctly.

If we truly desire the peace of God that God wants us to have, we have get completely in line with God. And that takes some commitment. There are no shortcuts. You don’t need to worry about the afterlife; I am quite sure that God will do everything necessary to bring you into his presence. What God really cares about right now is what is happening in your life right now, what is happening in this world right now. God stands ready to bring you perfect peace right here and right now. This Advent season I urge you to seek that peace by seeking God more tenaciously, more passionately. And may that peace that passes all understanding guard your heart and mind in Jesus Christ. And be a channel of that peace, bringing it to others. Amen.