

Dwelling: Peace John 14:27-29

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Have you ever gone back as an adult to the place where you grew up? If you have then you'll know what I mean when I say that our perspective as children is radically different than our perspective as adults. For instance, I used to walk to elementary school, and in my memory that walk was about ten miles. But when I returned as an adult, I discovered that it was actually less than a mile. Things just seemed bigger when I was smaller.

Something else that felt bigger than it probably was when I was smaller is that my neighborhood felt a bit dangerous. In my memory bullies prowled the streets looking for little kids like me to pick on, like sharks in chum-filled waters. And I was the chum. I remember being quite afraid to walk to certain places for fear of running into one of those bullies. But do you know when I wasn't afraid? When my big brother, Jim, walked with me. As a big brother Jim reserved the right to kick me to the curb whenever he pleased, but if anyone else tried to pick on me Jim turned into Mr. T, my personal bodyguard. When I walked through the neighborhood with Jim, even though the bullies were still around, I felt perfectly comfortable, perfectly at peace.

Today we're concluding our worship series entitled, "Dwelling." We've been exploring the work of the Holy Spirit, God's living presence in us. And we've been leaning into various practices to help us to dwell in the Spirit, to come awake to the Spirit's presence and work in our lives. Today we're going to hear Jesus teach his disciples that, just as my big brother's presence brought me comfort and peace, that's what the Holy Spirit does in our lives no matter what troubled neighborhood we're walking through.

Before I share today's Scripture reading, let me set the stage. Jesus and his disciples had been together for 3 years. The disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus, and despite what Jesus had taught them

to the contrary, the disciples still believed that Jesus would conquer their Roman oppressor and usher in a new Kingdom in which Jesus would be the new ruler and the disciples would be his cabinet. But as they gathered together in a rented, upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal, Jesus told them in no uncertain terms that he was going away. He was leaving them. And as you can imagine this news confused the disciples and troubled them deeply. In response to their confusion and fear, Jesus says this in John 14,

²⁷ "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. ²⁸ Remember what I told you: I am going away, but I will come back to you again. If you really loved me, you would be happy that I am going to the Father, who is greater than I am. ²⁹ I have told you these things before they happen so that when they do happen, you will believe.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

At the very beginning of John 14, Jesus says to the disciples, "Don't let your hearts be troubled...there's lots of room in my Father's house and I'm going to prepare a place for you so that one day we will be together, forever." Those are words we often read at funerals. There's a comfort in knowing that ultimately, we are going to dwell in God's presence forever. But what about today? And tomorrow? How will we, and the disciples, live untroubled and unafraid between now and the day we die? That's really the question that Jesus is answering in today's scripture reading.

Jesus says that he's giving us the gift of peace...his peace...peace of mind and heart. And this peace is unlike the peace that the world gives. Let's unpack that for a moment. First, the "peace that the world gives" would have had a very specific meaning in Jesus' day. It referred to the "Pax Romana," the Roman peace. It was a period of relative tranquility and a lack of military conflict because the Romans had either slaughtered or terrified their enemies. It was peace through brutality, and it was a peace that helped the rich get richer while the poor got poorer and more oppressed. There's nothing wrong with peace that stems from a lack of conflict, but that isn't the peace that Jesus is giving.

Jesus' peace isn't about what's happening outside of us; it's about what's happening inside of us. It

isn't a matter of external circumstances; it's a matter of internal connection. This promise of peace is connected to Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit – God's living presence – into the lives of his followers. And that's a promise that God delivered on the Day of Pentecost. This is good news because if our sense of peace is dependent upon a lack of conflict or hardship or trouble in this life...well, let's just say that there's a name for that enduring state of being in which there is no conflict, hardship or trouble. It's called death! Jesus said that in this life we will have trouble, and so Jesus promises a peace that we receive as a gift in the midst of our challenges, like dwelling in the eye of the hurricane.

In Hebrew, this peace is called Shalom. It's a state of wholeness, completeness that comes from God. And the way that God has wired us is that that sense of wholeness and completeness comes from connection, a deep abiding connection with God that comes through faith. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "The Lord gives perfect peace to those whose faith is firm." In other words, it is in entrusting ourselves into the care of God, the Creator of all things and the One who dwells within us through the Spirit, that we experience the peace that Jesus promises no matter what's happening around us.

While I've experienced that peace through prayer and meditation, time in Scripture and worship...all of which are practices of connection with God...more often than not in times of trouble I've experienced connection with God and that promised peace when I feel connected to others in whom the Spirit dwells. When I am surrounded by caring, loving, compassionate and faithful community I find that while the trouble around me may not change, the trouble within me certainly does. In the same way that the bullies still roamed the streets of my childhood neighborhood and yet I was at peace when my big brother was with me, we can experience peace, shalom, in the midst of trouble when we are connected to God by being deeply connected to community.

Several years ago I got a call from a friend whose mother was near death. This woman had been an ELCA pastor and had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer six months prior. Because of my connection to the family and to pancreatic cancer, I had been asked to be this woman's pastor as her life came to end. When I walked into her bedroom that evening it was clear that she wouldn't live through the night, but what was also clear is that she was perfectly at peace. She

was surrounded by family who held her hand, wiped her brow, prayed with her, told her that she was loved and sang her favorite hymns together...in four-part harmony no less! This woman was so connected by faith to God and by love to her family that even in the face of death she was at peace.

While peace is a gift, sometimes experiencing that peace is a choice. It's a choice to deepen our sense of connection to God and to one another. Peace in isolation is an oxymoron. That's why I think it is so important for us to get back into the habit of worshipping together. The fracturing of community, especially worshipping community, for the past two years has had a profound impact upon our mental and spiritual health. I realize that for some people group gatherings like on-campus worship are a health risk, and I'm glad that we have an online option to keep people connected. Here's some good news...summer is on the way and we plan to worship outdoors as much as possible for safety and to enjoy to feel more connected to creation.

But let's be honest. For some of us the reason we aren't gathering together for worship isn't really a matter of health. It's a matter of comfort. I admit, worship on the couch with a cup of coffee in my flannel pants is awfully comfortable and convenient. But it cannot provide the kind of connection for which we're made, the kind of connection that conveys the gift of peace. And it isn't just about us; it's about those who may need us to be present in community, to be that point of connection that conveys the peace that Jesus promises.

I don't want to imply that simply sitting in the sanctuary being surrounded by people will bring you peace. This isn't about checking off a spiritual to-do list. It's about connection. Connection to God happens when we don't treat it like a spectator sport but express our love for God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. And connection to others happens when we engage with a word of encouragement, a listening ear, a heart-felt prayer or a hug that expresses what words cannot. That kind of connection opens us to experiencing the gift of peace that Jesus promises because the Spirit of God in each of us and all of us together is at work connecting us.

So, consider this more than just an invitation back into community. Consider it a calling, a calling to both experience deeper peace and to be a conduit of that peace for others. Let's pray...