



A Piece of my Peace

Sunday, May 22, 2022
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Evans McGowan

John 14: 23-29

Revelations 22: 1-5

Ever since I can remember, I've loved climbing trees. I've always wanted to get to the highest point, just to see what I can see.

I remember one time in particular while camping, getting up before dawn and going to scale a tall pine tree, probably 60 feet or more just so I could catch the first light coming up over my favorite National Park, the Tetons. I'll never forget the first ray of light piercing the dark morning sky past me and illuminating the snowcapped mountains in a rose-hued glow. I marveled at the mountains as I slowly swayed through space atop that pine tree... I never felt so alone, and I never felt so alive (to quote one of my favorite Third Eye Blind songs).

I wonder: where do you go to find peace? Not all of us need to climb to the highest tree. For some of us, we find it in prayer or meditation. For others, it's out in nature on a beautiful day like yesterday or it's snuggled up with a good book while it's raining outside... Also like yesterday!

Still, there is something peaceful about trees – a testament of time and of growth. Trees have not only played an important role in my life, but also in the story of the Bible. In fact, as Rob Bell points out, all of history stands between two trees: In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, there is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and then in the end in Revelations as we read today, the Tree of Life.

It so happens this passage from Revelations was the scripture read at my wedding 14 years ago, held at First Pres in Northville just up the road from here. My wife and I wanted our union to be a tree of life whose leaves would be for the healing of the nations. There would be no more night, for God would be our light, and our marriage would last forever and ever. Alas, it was not to be so, for my wife and I divorced last year. Yet I like to think that our Tree of Life is still standing, and the leaves from the tree are still nourishing the ground around it, even if we are no longer tending to it.

One sign of our bond continuing is money we lent on Kiva.org to people around the world to start their own business. As these low-interest loans are paid back, the money is then lent to someone new. Over 13 years, our

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original \$1800 has now been lent to 800 people (the vast majority women) in nearly 80 countries for a total of over \$33,000, 18 times the original amount. I plan to continue to relend the money for as long as I live.

I believe love abides even we have nothing left to give, for God's love has the potential to flow out of any healthy relationship, and love's labor is never lost... but perhaps that's wishful thinking.

What I do know: Things do not always go according to plan.
We do not join in marriage thinking one day we will separate.
We do not usually take on a new job or project thinking one day we will quit.
Countries do not start wars thinking they will lose.
We do not enter places of peace, thinking there will be violence.

We do what we can to prepare, but change is our one constant; the unexpected will occur.

In these times, it's not only helpful to have a Plan B (or C or D for that matter!). It's also encouraging to hear the words of Christ, as we read in John today that as those who follow in Christ's footsteps would be granted Christ's peace.

And what does this peace mean?

Jesus says:

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.

And we read in Revelations passage:

*Nothing accursed will be found there any more
And
There will be no more night.*

In other words, Jesus seems to be singing along with Bobby McFerrin and Bob Marley:
Don't worry. Be Happy. And every little thing will be all right.

Yet we know that peace is short-lived in this lifetime...
The markets are volatile with so much uncertainty.
War continues to rage in Ukraine.
All of us mourn the horrific racial violence in Buffalo.
White supremacy continues to poison our political discourse,
And hateful words are leading to hateful acts.

Where might we find peace amidst so much turmoil in our lives and in our world?

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We know there is suffering in this world – all of the world’s greatest religions in varying degrees recognize to live is to suffer. Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths all center around suffering and how it keeps us from achieving nirvana, or peace.

As Dan Millman writes in the *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*:

*“If you don’t get what you want, you suffer;
if you get what you don’t want, you suffer;
[but] even when you get exactly what you want,
you still suffer because you can’t hold on to it forever.”*

As the writer of Ecclesiastes notes, all humans suffer, and then we die.

How are we to find peace when there is so much suffering?

I invite you to look at the front of our bulletin today. The artist describes, “[The rising sun’s] gentle light soften[ing] the harsh contradictions in our world.” It reminds me of the morning sun I saw over the Tetons.

Yet as I said in our weekly e-newsletter, *Our Life Together* – email us if you aren’t getting it! – I can’t help but notice the white ray of light piercing the sun’s gentle glow of peace.

One hint: the cross - You see, between these two trees in which we live our lives, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, there is the tree on which Jesus is planted, the cross. We see hints of the cross in our painting today.

Growing up, I was drawn to the book *A Separate Peace*. In it, two boys are living a carefree summer of their dreams in an idyllic setting. But when one boy becomes jealous of the other, he impulsively causes the other boy to fall, thus altering the course of both of their lives.

I’ve only ever been in one real fight, and it was over jealousy – a cute girl had moved into our neighborhood and started to hang out with my best friend. I remember as if it was yesterday, standing with my best friend in my yard, and she was about to hop the fence into mine. I told her she was not allowed to come over.

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Essentially, I wanted my best friend all to myself, and I was using my parent's property rights to enforce my desire. She hopped onto the chain link fence, and I pushed her off. She fell into some barbwire - it was Texas, after all, before jumping over the fence and facing me, bloody hands and knees. I then took her down once, twice, with a move I had learned in karate.

She ended up leaving with my best friend's younger brother.

I am not proud of what I did that day. Kids can do the darnedest and meanest things. If I could face her now, I would say I am sorry and ask for forgiveness. But I do not know where she is, and I can only trust that others have helped her find peace and she is not traumatized by the events of that day.

Author and Pastor Eugene Peterson says:

*We often say Rest in Peace for the dead, for the struggle to live is finally over.
Yet peace is not just negative but also positive.*

The artist of today's piece, Anneke Kaai notes:

The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, is all about having a wholesome relationship - with God, oneself, those around you and the environment.

Indeed, the Greek word used for peace here, *eirene* from the verb *eiro* = to join or bind together that which has been separated.

We may find our peace in separation – climbing a tree, retreating in prayer, being alone in nature. Yet God's peace not only gives us rest, but also the energy to emanate peace. In other words, God's peace is not just for us individually, but for us collectively.

Peterson continues: God's peace is not simply absence of evil but the presence of good... "not *less* hassle but *more* harmony, harmony between things and people, but mostly people—alert and relational mutuality, personal exchanges of respect and delight. (I'm reminded how each Sunday we "pass the peace" to one another.) He continues: "There is nothing lethargic or static about peace; it involves total participation in life at its most vital."

And it takes effort and intention to join things back together. When Jesus talks about binding oneself to something – be it God's love, God's law, etc. – It means getting in right relation with one another.

We long for a peace to separate us from the raging world around us... yet that's a fool's errand, a loss of innocence.

Still we long to get back to Eden. Revelation promises a return to Eden... but it's a *New* Heaven and a *NEW* Earth... not the old.

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Longing for a restoration of the past can lead to dangerous ideology, such as believing in the nationalist Great Replacement conspiracy, or any belief where all people in one group are evil and must be eradicated to restore the peace.

We live in a world where thoughts and ideas once considered extreme have now entered the mainstream.

Yet here is another radical notion: Jesus came to eradicate sins not sinners. In fact, Jesus came to save sinners... through the reconciliation of his life, death and resurrection.

This is the power of the Holy Spirit...

At the end of this passage, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto his disciples... giving them the power of peace, “making them highly energetic participants in everything that Jesus had been doing among them. Jesus’ gift of peace set them loose in the world and they were soon turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6) as they continued doing Jesus’ work of proclaiming and healing, teaching and loving, praying and giving witness to the resurrection.” In other words, doing peace work.

“When we receive God’s peace our experience is not of being removed from conflict so that we can live a quiet, undisturbed life on our own terms. No, we are plunged into life on God’s terms, the light-filled action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the three-ring circus of salvation.

We need God’s power for peace – not to separate us from each other, but to empower us to do the hard work of being in right relationship with another. Sometimes, when physical or mental health is in danger, separation is needed for safety. But too often we err on the side of separation rather than to reach out in reconciliation.

We as lovers of the light are not to hide in darkness, but to step out and lean in... until we see strangers as neighbors, enemies as friends... and God knows we need the Peace of Christ to guide our nonviolent resistance to oppression and support of justice and equality for all.

To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “Disruptions in peace anywhere are a threat to peace everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

To take his words a step further: We are all growing our own trees into a forest of love and support. Not all of us are called into relationships with certain people – we cannot climb all trees and there are certain trees we shouldn't climb. There are abusive and toxic relationships. There are simply friendships that fade and marriages that disintegrate into divorce – but together as a community we make up a forest of trees, trees of knowledge and of life, and most importantly, trees of peace where hope springs eternal from the seed of Christ, the Most Human One, who showed us a path of peace that leads to salvation, not just for us and those we love, but for all people and all of creation.

And when our piece is pierced,
May we remember the Prince of Peace,
Who was also pierced,
Who knows and feels our pain,
And offers healing, forgiveness, redemption,
And a love that will not let us go,
That we might be in right relation
With ourselves,
Our neighbors
And all those around us.

To practice *eirene...shalom...* peace...

To be whole once more and woven into that single garment of destiny: that of one Love, one Light, one Life.

In Christ, through Christ, with Christ.

Let us each bring a piece of our peace, and build a more peaceful world, together.

A piece of my peace will be with you always.

Peace be with you.