

"The Peace of Christ"

"PEACE, PEACE!" cries the Cape Cod homemaker in the midst of her parade of summer company.

"Give me peace!" begs the man whose life is strangled by a guilty conscience.

"Oh, for real peace!" dreams the family whose financial security is being undermined by our struggling economy.

The cry for peace is on many lips today. But we need to ask, what kind of peace is being sought? Is it only the peace the world can give? Or is it another kind of peace--a peace which is deeper, more lasting, more refreshing, and more life-giving?

Many of you know of my interest in books. Awhile back, while foraging in a used bookstore, I discovered shelf-upon-shelf of books whose titles were monotonously uniform. Upon inquiry I learned that all of those books were once in the same private library.

Within that collection there were books on how to pray for money and success. There were books on how to win peace of mind. There were books on how to exploit one's own hidden, inner resources. There were books on how to influence others to one's own best advantage.

Row upon row, that collection of books virtually guaranteed the beholder a self-help path to new life, with new powers and new riches.

My first reaction was to be amused by that extensive collection of what I would call Dale Carnegie spirituality. But then I began to wonder, "Is that what people today are really searching for most--the kind of personal peace and fulfillment which comes from worldly possessions and worldly powers?"

As a Christian, I couldn't help but think that the worldly kind of peace promised by those books is really an illusion. As a minister, I couldn't help but feel concern for the unknown individual who felt compelled to amass such a library.

But then, another more positive thought entered my mind! It occurred to me, that whoever had gathered that library of shallow promises, hopes, and get-rich-quick techniques, had finally had the good sense to discard it. Now all those books just sat in that used book shop gathering dust.

IT'S A SERIOUS QUESTION we all face. When in our distress, our weakness, our inadequacy we cry out for peace in our lives, what kind of peace

are we really seeking?

Are we seeking only the peace the world can give? Or are we seeking the peace which Christ gives? There's a difference, a marked difference.

And, I think it behooves us, as Christians, to know that difference.

Consider the homemaker who comes to the end of August and is exhausted by her summer guests. What kind of peace does she really need? On the surface, she can seek less company or a bigger house to entertain in. But on a deeper level, doesn't she really need an inner quietness of spirit?

Consider the man tortured by his conscience. What kind of peace does he really need? On a superficial level, he can try to re-assure himself that deceptions and dishonesties are justifiable in a "dog-eat-dog" world.

But on a deeper level, doesn't that man really need to feel in his heart, that beyond his shortcomings, there is a greater truth in our world which can inspire him and to which he should dedicate his life?

The family distraught over finances, what kind of peace do they really need? On the surface, they can seek more money. But on a deeper level, don't they really need a sense of trust that whatever the future brings, their family will be held in the loving embrace of a greater reality?

WHEN PEOPLE CRY OUT for peace, too often their vision is limited. Too often they look in the wrong place for a peace which will sustain them. Too often they seek only the peace which the world can give, and not the peace which is at the foundation of life itself.

Too often people struggle to control the troubled surface of their lives, but ignore the deeper places of their existence.

Jesus taught us that, "One does not live by bread alone." Yet, there are many in our world who are still unconvinced. They desperately grab for worldly possessions and powers. But at the same time, they allow the more profound things in life just slip through their fingers.

The kind of peace the world can give is appealing and seductive. But ultimately the world's kind of peace is transitory, illusory, and unsatisfying.

As we know, the fortunes and pleasures of humankind rise and fall like the tides. Circumstances completely beyond our control repeatedly ebb and flow all around us.

To set one's hopes fully on fame or possessions or talents is to court disappointment. For there may well come a day in anyone's life, when fame is forgotten, possessions are lost, and talent has grown stale.

The stark disaster of such a day was portrayed by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *To Have and Have Not*. Perhaps an indicator of his own later disappointment with life, Hemingway wrote the following to describe the agony of "Black Tuesday." That was the infamous day in 1929 when the stock market crashed. As Hemingway wrote,

Some made the long drop from the apartment or the office window; some took it quietly in two-car garages with the motor running; some used the native tradition of the Colt or Smith and Wesson; those well-constructed implements that end insomnia, terminate remorse, cure cancer, avoid bankruptcy, and blast an exit from the intolerable positions by the pressures of a finger.

When the peace and powers that the world can give are taken away, when lives are stripped of their possessions and comforts, what then? Is there anything left to life which is worthwhile?

THIS MORNING I bring you Good News--the Good News of Jesus Christ. For in this world there really is a durable peace which time cannot diminish, fortune cannot reverse, and thieves cannot plunder.

That durable peace is in our world, but not of it. That great, invincible peace comes to us as a gift from the now risen Christ. That gift can come to all of us who believe in him.

As Christians, we are deeply indebted to the *Gospel According to John* for its depiction of that great promise of peace from Jesus.

According to John's Gospel, it was the night of Jesus' Last Supper. The shadows were quickly falling over Jesus and his disciples as they gathered together in that Upper Room in Jerusalem. Already, the sinister evil of the cross was becoming a stark reality.

In that intimate supper setting, the disciples were gripped with fear. They feared that Jesus would be arrested and executed by the state.

They were also fearful for themselves, for if Jesus was crucified, what would become of them? Would they also be arrested and executed? What of all their dreams for the future? Without Jesus to lead them, wouldn't all their dreams be shattered and meaningless?

Those disciples were terrified at what even the next few hours would bring. But in the midst of their great fear, here's what Jesus did. Jesus gave them a promise. It was a promise which pointed those disciples to a great reservoir of well-being, which was beyond all their fears. As Jesus promised those disciples, and you heard in our scripture reading earlier:

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live, you also will live...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.

[John 14:18,19,27]

Do you recall the time when Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee? The disciples were quaking at the sight of tremendous waves which surged around their boat. Yet, Jesus rose up in their midst. Jesus stretched out his arms and rebuked the wind and seas, saying, "Peace! Be still!" And it was so. The wind ceased and a great calm came upon the waters.

In a spiritual sense, that same miracle happened once again on the night of the Last Supper. For in the midst of the swirling tempest of his disciples' fears, Jesus proclaimed, and promised them, his own special peace to calm their fears.

That promise of Jesus' own peace, withstood even the terrible tragedy of Good Friday. For as we well know, the cross was not the end. For God raised Jesus again to a new life. Jesus was raised again to dwell ever after, not just in God's heaven, but also in the hearts of those who have faith.

And so it is, even in our modern age, that the risen Christ comes into our hearts with his special gift of peace.

That special peace which Christ brings is a peace which the world can never take away. It's a spiritual peace. It's an enduring peace, which is manifested in every passing generation of humankind.

On the night of the Last Supper, the disciples did not understand that promise of peace which Jesus made. Perhaps they were even tempted to question what kind of peace it was, that would allow an innocent man, like Jesus, to be crucified?

We can only speculate as to the disciples' thoughts that night. But this much we do know. In the years following that Last Supper, those disciples came to focus more and more upon Jesus' promise of peace.

And they began to experience that gift of peace more and more, even as they faced persecution and immense suffering, as they conducted their ministry for Christ.

Whereas other people of their time were buffeted and discouraged by the whims of changing fortune, those faithful followers of the risen Christ found themselves blessed with a new sense of well-being. Through their faith, their hearts came to feel a deep sense of inner peace which brought with it, a deep sense of security

and trust in God.

The world in its cruelty might break their bodies and take their lives.
But the peace of Christ those early disciples experienced, could not
be destroyed.

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY, that special gift of Christ's
peace has been an enabler. It has made heroes out of ordinary people.
It has made the weak strong and the defeated victorious.

The gift of Christ's peace has that effect on those who believe. For
wherever that peace dwells in a person's heart, it is an anchor which
stabilizes one's life in the midst of the world's confusion and
flux. That peace is also a foretaste of the well-being which
comes in eternity with God.

With that gift of Christ's peace in their hearts, Christians have long
found unexpected assurance and fortitude to face their fears and
disasters. Because of that peace, Christians have even been able to
find an unexplainable oasis of serenity, in the midst of
physical pain.

IT HAS BEEN SAID that many centuries ago, the great Church Father
Augustine said this of God:

Thou hast touched me and I have been translated into thy peace.ⁱ

So it is in Christian life. Through the presence of the risen Christ and
the gift of his peace, our lives are transformed. Our hearts are
renewed with new power, new confidence, and new calm--in spite of
all difficult worldly circumstances.

The Apostle Paul described that peace as a peace "which passes
understanding."

[Philippians 4:7]

IN FACT, there have been times in my own life, when that special peace
has come into my own heart, even in the midst of trying circumstances.
And, down through the years of my ministry, I have known
Christians, both here in our household of faith and elsewhere,
who have been blessed with their own experiences of that
peace.

People might ask:

- How can it be that in the midst of financial reverses, a businessman
can suddenly pause and see some humor in his situation?
- How can it be that after the death of a child, grieving parents can
eventually find inner serenity and hope for the future?

This is where the peace of Christ is so unexplainable. For that special
peace blossoms in some of the most adverse situations.

That peace of Christ can come quite mysteriously into our lives, like a dawning sun whose shining rays suddenly break through a dense morning fog. Or, as someone else once said, that peace comes to us this way.

*It shimmers on the crest of a wave of pain. It is the spear of frustration transformed into a shaft of light.*ⁱⁱ

Who can account for the peace of Christ in their lives? Who can earn that peace? In fact, this wonderful peace of Christ cannot be won. It is entirely a gift. It is a blessing, which God lavishly confers on those who open their hearts to receive it.

The peace of Christ is the promise and the presence of Christ's love in our hearts. It is our solid anchor in the mystery and majesty of God.

The peace of Christ comes to us through faith. It is not a worldly technique for getting rich quick or becoming successful. Yet, the world cannot defeat it.

The peace of Christ is, in fact, the love of Christ, poured out for us all to receive, ever since that poignant night so long ago in that Jerusalem Upper Room.

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Let us pray,

Almighty God, you have promised fullness of life to all who believe in your son Jesus Christ. However, there are so many times, when each of us has struggled to shoulder our burdens all by ourselves. There are so many times when we have felt despair, and looked everywhere else, except into our own hearts, to find our well-being.

Eternal God, bring us out of our vain wanderings and away from our many superficial, worldly diversions. Help us to look inward with the eyes of faith, so that we may find your divine presence within us.

And finding your presence, may we also be joyfully surprised to discover also, that special peace of your son, which passes all understanding. In his name, and in his eternal promise, we make this prayer--not only for ourselves, but for all who worship with us this morning. Amen.

ENDNOTES

i. *St. Augustine Confessions*, Book X, chapter 47. Frank S. Mead, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1945), 325.

ii. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind: The Place of Meaning in a Global Civilization* (Quest Books, 2003), 223.