

Acts 4: 23-37
Psalm 133
John 20: 19-29

Peace-givers and Peace-keepers
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One week after Easter, Jesus is on the loose. He shows up in strange places: behind locked doors, by the side of a lake, on the top of a mountain, and whenever people manage to transcend selfishness and live generous lives. Jesus shows up in the breathy words, "Peace be with you." And this is very Good News.

Our story from the Book of Acts tells us that Jesus also shows up in courageous witness and in the life of a harmonious community. The Christian community in Jerusalem in the years following the first Easter was an exciting and radical endeavor. Its leaders were being arrested, they were spreading the revolutionary teachings of the Kingdom of God, and - most surprising - they seem to live in what we might call a socialist commune. "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." A Utopia in the midst of military occupation and persecution. Amazing.

I imagine that those who lived in that community took to heart Psalm 133. It echoed through their common life. How good it was when brothers and sisters lived together in unity. It was like oil running down the hair and beard of a priest (an odd image for us, but, trust me, it sounded good to them) and it was like the dew from Mount Hermon filling the streams with life giving water, which flowed on to the surrounding plains. It was the very foundation of the abundant life.

Perhaps it was, in fact, the outside threat that made this community possible. When the founding apostles were in prison, they circled the wagons, so to speak. Life was precious; life could end at any moment; Jesus might show up at any moment - what was the point of hoarding possessions? With the distance of time, with the blessing of security, with the status of mainstream, culturally-approved religion, we lose some of the early enthusiasm for sharing. Paradoxically, with more possessions comes fear, and planning and hoarding and doubting: what about retirement? What about my future? What about the neighborhood?

Speaking of threats from the outside world, we read in John's Gospel that the disciples huddled behind locked doors in the week after the crucifixion. It says that "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear..." This is one of our default responses to trauma. We hunker down behind locked doors, afraid of more violence from that which has already assaulted us. Denial paralyzes us. We don't expect grace, especially from a murdered king. The Gospel writer John has made it clear that Jesus is King of the Jews. Kings who survive an insurrection are not noted for their mercy toward the perpetrators. Jesus' words "Peace be with you," (and in Matthew's Gospel, "Do not be afraid,") are not the words we expect when we discover that the one we betrayed has come back. Instead, we expect violent retribution and retaliation.

Here is the Good News. Despite the locked doors Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' When all that their minds and hearts could hold was, "We have lost our world. We have lost our self-respect. Our leader, and with him, our way of life, is dead," Jesus shows up. Jesus is on the loose, and enters our locked room and says, "Peace be with you."

Those words were the foundation of a new kind of community. They were called to *self-forgiving* peace, and then to a life that forgives, a life that serves. In some ways, this life looks - to the world at large - not only compassionate but wasteful. But we are called, as John Shelby Spong says, to "wasteful, expansive, freely given love." We are called to a life which is non-retaliatory, which does not store up grievances or victories as something to be gained.

In the 21st century, we, here in Norwich, are not likely to practice the way of life of a small group of new Christians in the city of Jerusalem. But many of us recognize that our way of life is also under threat. It is not a Roman Imperial system, dragging us before the temple priests or a Pontius Pilate. But we do suffer in a time of environmental degradation, of distrust within and between communities, of economic inequity and extreme wastefulness. So what would an Acts 4: 32 community look like in our time? How can the peace that Jesus breathed into his friends transform us into peace-givers and peace-keepers?

We can start by being a peace-breathing community right here. Each Sunday, we speak and answer words of confession that enact Jesus' commission: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." We choose to forgive and be forgiven. And each Sunday, we share the Peace of Christ as a ritual act. This is more than a good morning to a neighbor. As Susan White wrote recently, "This is not a passive, 'sure, you can come in' sort of hospitality, but rather an active, devotional form of hospitality. It welcomes strangers and seekers and integrates them into the community. It invites them, lovingly, to share in the common life of the community." In some ways it flows out of the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon, it flows out of listening to the word read and preached, and out of praying for the needs of loved ones. We admit we need God's peace and also acknowledge that far too often we lack that peace.

Then we can find ways to give and keep peace that are not liturgical, but practical: as practical as that Jerusalem church pooling resources. There are lively conversations happening outside the church doors. Many people actually want to overcome alienation, distrust, and dead ends. For instance, ServiceSpace is an organization run entirely by volunteers. They leverage technology to encourage everyday people around the world to do small acts of service. They aim to ignite the fundamental generosity in the giver and others, creating both inner and outer transformation. The founder of ServiceSpace, Nipun Mehta, invented a word: giftivism, 'the practice of radically generous acts that change the world.' Sounds like a spiritual practice to me. Then there are what are called 'Redistribution markets': online market places enabling goods no longer needed by their original owner to be reused elsewhere. One of the underlying shifts in worldview and thinking is moving from needing to own to preferring simply to have access to shared goods and services. Then there are 'collaborative lifestyles', which extends the people to people exchanges from physical goods to the sharing of time, skills, space and money.

We might find Jesus on the loose in some of those interactions, quietly breathing "Peace be with you."

I said earlier that our way of life is also under threat. The journalist and minister Chris Hedges tells this story of a world under threat, an end of the world story:

Back in 1992, Bosnian Serb forces began a siege of the city of Gorazde. The Mr. and Mrs. Sorak, Christian Serbs, lived in the city with their oldest son, Zoran, and his wife. Zoran was arrested by the Muslim and disappeared. The younger son was also killed. The parents and the daughter-in-law were terrified and harassed, barely surviving. Peace was non-existent, beyond imagination. In the midst of this the widowed daughter-in-law gave birth to a baby girl, but was unable to nurse her. With the food shortages, the elderly and infants were dying in droves, and after a short time, the baby, given only tea to drink, began to fade. Meanwhile, on the eastern edge of Goražde, Fadil Fejzic, (Fay szhitz) an illiterate Muslim farmer, kept his one cow, milking her by night so as to avoid Serbian snipers. On the fifth day of the baby having only tea, just before dawn, Fejzic appeared at the door with half a litre of milk for the baby. He refused money. He came back with milk every day for 442 days, until the daughter in law and granddaughter left for Serbia. During this time he never said anything. Other families in the street started to insult him, telling him to give his milk to Muslims and let the Chetnik (the pejorative term for Serbs) die. But he did not relent.

Later the Soraks moved, and lost touch with Fejzic. But Hedges went and sought him out. The cow had been slaughtered for meat before the end of the siege, and Fejzic had fallen on hard times. But, as Hedges says :

When I told him I had seen the Soraks, his eyes brightened.

“And the baby?” he asked “How is she?”

In the midst of war, a Muslim and a Christian made and kept peace, because Jesus was still on the loose.

Whatever overwhelms us, Jesus comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, Jesus still shows up and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, Jesus calls us to share this life-giving, life changing peace, and sends us out into the world to **be** justice and kindness to give and keep the peace that passes understanding.

Peace be with you. Amen.