

“Peace Is the Hand of God Touching Your Aching Soul.”

- Crystal Roberts

John 14:1-3, 15-19, 25-29
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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My father died back in 2004, eighteen years ago, from what started as melanoma skin cancer. My mother died five years later in 2009 after a long battle with Alzheimer's. On the Sunday I returned here after my mom's memorial service in Dallas, beloved church member Charlotte Slemph, who sadly passed away earlier this year, came up to me after worship and lovingly said, “**You are now an orphan.**” That really hit me up-side the head and took me a bit by surprise. For it brought a realization to the truth that I no longer had parents who were alive. My immediate emotional thought was that I felt even more alone.

Before hearing Charlotte's comment, I generally considered orphans as young children whose parents or guardians had somehow died early. Both of my parents were in their 80s. Yet, the ultimate reality, I came to realize, was the same. However, upon further reflection I didn't really *feel* like an orphan because their life with me and our family left a remarkable legacy. A legacy of memories of life and love together. My parents were, and are, somehow still with me, spiritually if not physically.

That experience brought a new and deeper meaning the next time I preached from today's Gospel reading from John 14. In response to the disciple's anxiety and impending grief that Jesus would soon be leaving them, **Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned...** In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live (John 14:18-19). **As all four of the gospel writer understood it, Jesus' earthly physical presence was replaced by the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit, whom John calls, the Advocate.** But I'm sure the disciples still experienced separation anxiety from the departure of their teacher and friend. As did I when both of my parents were gone.

Have you ever had an experience of separation anxiety? Since it's a normal part of the developmental process in growing up, all of us have most likely felt this several times. Babies experience it when they don't see the face of the one taking care of them. Young children face it when they turn around in a crowded place and a parent or guardian, sibling or friend just wasn't there. There's an overwhelming sense of being lost and left all alone, perhaps to never being found again. Separation anxiety can be triggered in older youth and adults by any number of things. As mentioned, it can be experienced in the loss of a loved one, something many in our community of faith are facing at this very moment. It is also experienced upon the death of a beloved pet, the ending of a relationship or friendship, leaving or losing a job, perhaps retirement, going away to college, watching a child move away from home for the first time, or having to

move from a place that is familiar and comfortable. **During the past two and a half years, a good number of us have also experienced separation anxiety, some even loneliness and depression, due to the COVID pandemic by having to be sequestered, working at home away from co-workers, not being able to attend church in person, or even visit relatives or friends.**

I bring up the issue of separation anxiety, even feeling orphaned, because this is the backdrop, the context, of today's Gospel reading from John 14. The author of this gospel shares a story that deals directly with a specific and very real fear. It's even worse than separation anxiety. It's the **fear of being abandoned**. Many people today struggle with abandonment issues. Jesus acknowledges this fear in his disciples after he told them (during what we call the Last Supper) that he would soon be leaving them, referring to his impending arrest and execution by crucifixion. The author of the Gospel of John is also addressing an issue that is important to his own community of faith some 60 years or so after the death of Jesus. They faced a question that still has relevance today.

- **How is it that the Christian community can experience the *spiritual* Presence of Christ without the *physical* presence of Jesus?**

The answer found in this gospel is Jesus' promise that after his departure God will give them an Advocate, to be with them – and us – forever. **The promise: the same divine Spirit of God that was in Jesus of Nazareth will be sent to dwell within us.** That's what we will be celebrating two weeks from now on Pentecost Sunday. Different English versions of the Bible translate the Greek word *parakletos* (from which we get Paraclete) as "Advocate" (NRSV) or "Comforter" (KJV) or "Counselor" (NIV) or "Helper". We are told that this divine spirit is the Spirit of truth. We are also told that the purpose of this indwelling Spirit of truth is to teach us, to remind believers of what Jesus taught, and to empower them (us) to fulfill his commandments – specifically the command to love one another, and especially within our own community of faith, which we looked at in detail last Sunday.

The promise of God's Sacred Presence, the continuing spiritual Presence of Christ among us, the indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit, reiterates one of the primary promises of God found in the Bible: "I will not leave you orphaned" (John 14:18). Recall these words anytime you feel separation anxiety, loneliness, abandonment, of being left all alone.

All of this leads to another one of the greatest promises in scripture. **"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 14:27). Chances are these words are familiar to you. That's because this passage, along with Psalm 23, is one of the most common readings in the context of a memorial service – words we've had to hear too often lately. It is in and through the understanding that we will never be abandoned by God that brings meaning to Jesus' words, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." These are some of the most pastoral words found anywhere in scripture. **This peace has a deep connection with the Hebrew word, shalom. Shalom is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of personal and communal well-being.**

We are also meant to take notice that there is indeed something different in the internal peace that Jesus gives and the peace that the world gives. Reflecting on this

passage from John 14, classic biblical commentator William Barclay wisely wrote around 65 years ago:

The peace that the world offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble, the peace which comes from refusing to face things... The peace which Jesus offers us is the peace which no sorrow, no danger, no suffering can make less. It is the peace which is independent of outward circumstances.

The peace that Jesus promises results from the Presence of the Holy Spirit teaching us and assuring us that the Sacred Presence of God is among us and dwells within us. This is what we remind ourselves of each Sunday during the Passing of the Peace, when we share with one another the words, "The peace of Christ be with you," and respond with, "And also with you."

"The peace [that Jesus gives]," writes another biblical commentator, "is the confidence that God is God, that God loves the world, that God is for us, and that God makes that love real in acts of self-giving. Therefore, neither our pains nor our pleasures, neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate; they do not create nor do they annul the peace of God." Or as the Dalai Lama said, "Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means – through dialogue, education, knowledge, and through humane ways." This can serve as a reflection upon Jesus' statement, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9). This kind of peace begins through discovering inner peace. Or, as stated by author Crystal Roberts, "**Peace is the hand of God touching your aching soul.**"

As you depart from this sanctuary today, or finish watching the service online, and throughout this coming week and hopefully always, cling tightly to this promise from Jesus: *I will not leave you orphaned... 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.*

May the shalom of God, the peace of Christ be with you.

Amen.

Resources:

Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, *Feasting on the Word*
William Barclay, *John*