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A reworking of my sermon for Easter 6C, May 21, 1995  
John 14:23-29

#### PRAYER OF THE DAY

O God, from whom all good things come: Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to think those things which are right, and by your goodness help us to do them; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

#### HOLY GOSPEL .....John 14:23-29, RSV

Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. <sup>24</sup>He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. <sup>25</sup>These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup>You heard me say to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup>And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe.

In the name of the Father, and the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus said to his disciples] Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... (John 14:27)

What is Christian peace? What is this peace that Christ gives to his disciples? Let me approach an answer by three steps, like walking up the stairs. First, I will try to say what Christian peace *is not*. Here, I will suggest some distinctions, to help separate Christian peace from things that might look like peace but are not really the peace given by Christ. Second, I will try to say what Christian peace *opposes*. We need this peace. There are temptations and conditions of the soul that are unworthy of a Christian, and we need Christian peace to try to combat them. And finally, the third step, I will try to say positively what I think Christian peace *is*.

So, step one: What Christian peace is not! Here is my list: Christian peace is not surfeit, which means that it is not the condition of fullness, when no desires remain to be fulfilled. Nor does Christian peace mean the absence of troubles. It is not a truce or a peace treaty ending conflict. Nor does it mean cheerfulness of

spirit.

So, if you want Christian peace, do not think that it is the same thing as fullness, the lifting of troubles, the ending of conflict, or a happy personality. All of these things are good, but Christian peace seems to be something a bit different from them. Let me say more about these other candidates for peace.

First, Christian peace is not surfeit. It is not that stuffed feeling. I remember shopping with my mother when I was a little boy. I remember thinking that the great thing about being a grown-up is that I would be able to buy all the candy I wanted. And sure enough, that is one of the great things about being an adult! But, sad to say, being able to buy all the candy you want is not the same thing as peace. Do you remember a time in your life when you were lean and hungry? Do you remember a time when you were ambitious, and you thought to yourself things like this: "If only I could get a bigger, quieter apartment, I'd at last be happy. I'll have peace at last when I've satisfied this hunger." Well, maybe so. Maybe peace will come when we at last satisfy the desires of our heart.

Only, that kind of peace seems not to be the kind of peace that Jesus gives to his disciples. Jesus had no home, no place to lay his head. He had peace, but was still empty of many ordinary things we take for granted. It is the same with the apostles, martyrs, and saints. Their Christian peace is not marred by their emptiness. Life does not last long enough to supply all their desires, and yet, they have that peace that passes all understanding. Christian peace can survive both fullness and emptiness. Indeed, Christian peace seems to move along a different track from our desires, so that this peace is dependent neither on our hunger nor our fullness.

Nor is Christian peace the same thing as an untroubled life. We know that for two reasons. First off, Jesus says so. Just two chapters later in these same farewell discourses, Jesus makes a clarification in his discussion of peace. He says this to his disciples:

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.(John 16:33)

The other way we know that our Lord's peace is different from the absence of troubles is by experience. Isn't it the case that in this world we have troubles? Even the holy apostles had their troubles. Paul, for example, does not hesitate to admit that he suffered a great deal in his life as an apostle. It is clear that Paul is not an apostle for the fun of it. The peace of Christ does not mean a spell in the storm of affliction. Why, listen to his description of the apostles of Christ:

<sup>9</sup>For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on show right at the end, like men condemned to death: we have been exhibited as a spectacle to the whole universe, both angelic and human. <sup>10</sup>Here we are, fools for Christ's sake... <sup>11</sup>To this day, we go short of food and drink and clothes, we are beaten up and we have no homes; <sup>12</sup>we

earn our living by labouring with our own hands; when we are cursed, we answer with a blessing; when we are hounded, we endure it passively; <sup>13</sup>when we are insulted, we give a courteous answer. We are treated even now as the dregs of the world, the very lowest scum.(1 Corinthians 4:9-13, NJB)

True, the apostles were recipients of Christ's promise of peace. Yet, they had their full share of troubles. And some of them died the death of martyrs. So, the peace of Christ does not mean a carefree life. Christian men and women, boys and girls, suffer in this world along with our fellow humanity. We get up in the morning, we peddle as hard as we can all day, we try to do some good in this world, same as many unbelievers, and along with them, we have troubles. We get sick. We make mistakes and are justly rebuked. We are misunderstood, same as so many others in this world. And at last, we lie down and die. Christ gives us peace, yes, but that is not the same thing as the absence of troubles.

Nor is this peace the same thing as a truce. It is not like a peace treaty or a cease fire. This peace does not mean the end of conflict. Indeed, it seems to launch us into a new kind of conflict. As Jesus said,

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...(Matthew 10:34)

St. Paul, for example, is not just whistling Dixie when he speaks of the good fight of faith. "Fight the good fight of the faith," Paul tells Timothy.(I Timothy 6:12) "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."(II Timothy 2:3) "Put on the full armor God... the belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit."(Ephesians 6:11-18) "Resist the devil..." These are all active verbs: fight, endure, resist. No, the promised peace of Christ does not mean the end of battle.

Nor does the peace of Christ seem to mean cheerfulness of spirit. Again, the apostle Paul was not always cheerful. He got lonely in prison and he complained of it. He got mad about fellow apostles who disagreed with him. He became furious with congregational leaders who insulted him and misled the flock. Paul had the peace of Christ, but he did not always have serenity.

So, the method of distinction yields these results: Christian peace is not the same thing as surfeit, absence of troubles, end of conflict, or a spirit of cheerfulness.

To make a little more advance on the meaning of Christian peace, let's think of what this peace opposes. Chief of all, Christian peace opposes despair. You may remember from Catechism days that Luther considered despair to be the greatest temptation facing the Christian. The one who gives up the good fight of faith... the one who huddles behind defenses, conserving his strength, taking no risks... that is the one who is struggling with despair. He or she has forgotten that we have strength in the Lord! He or she has forgotten or perhaps no longer believes the

Lord is with us. But the peace of Christ opposes such despair. When Christ gives us his peace, he gives us the assurance that in the midst of troubles, warfare, temptation, and affliction, we are nonetheless sheltered by the strong arm of the Lord.

And the peace of Christ opposes cynicism and ennui. When Jesus promised his peace to the disciples, he thereby gave them reason to let out a cry of protest against the tired words of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. That Preacher, after surveying human life, said this:

I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.(Eccl 2:17)

No, human life is not meaningless. It is not a mere chasing after wind.

And we need the peace of Christ in our hearts, in the very center of our being, so that we do not fall into such despair. I may not be very good at saying what Christian peace is, but at least I can say what Christian peace opposes: It opposes despair, cynicism, and boredom. The one with Christian peace is the one who is able to go on, day after day, neither terrified by the prospect of death and other evils, nor overcome by the ordinariness of daily life. That is why the saints are like light in darkness or a breath of cool fresh air in the midst of a blazing summer. It is not that all goes well with the saint. It is just that his peace, her peace, radiates outward and uplifts the community.

So, what is this peace? What does the saint have that most of us are only beginning to have? Here is my proposal: Christian peace is the state of the soul of the one who says to Christ Jesus: I am thine! We have Christian peace when Christ matters to us... when we find ourselves regularly remembering him and taking him into account. Through rain or sunshine, through hunger or satisfaction, through defeat or victory, the one with Christian peace is the one who can stare reality in the face and say, Nonetheless, I belong to Christ.

I think I mentioned a few weeks ago that this is the 60th anniversary year of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death. Let me now read aloud his meditative poem called "Who Am I?" That poem puts into words this man's sense of Christian peace. His world is collapsing around him. Soon the soldiers will drag him from Tegel prison and hang him. To onlookers, he appears calm. He inspires them. Inside he is full of fear and anger and sadness. Yet one thing he knows, and it makes all the difference in the world to him: he belongs to Jesus.

Who am I?  
Who am I? They often tell me  
I would step from my cell's confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me

I would talk to my warders  
freely and friendly and clearly,  
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I would bear the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I know of myself,  
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,  
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,  
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,  
tossing in expectation of great events,  
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.  
(*Letters and Papers from Prison*, page 347&48)

This Christian peace is possible for us. It is not just for heroes of the faith, but also for you and me. Jesus said that he gives his peace to us in a distinctive way. "Not as the world gives do I give to you." (John 14:27) The world cannot give this kind of peace, for the world is not resurrected. But Jesus is resurrected. Jesus gives himself to us, Sunday by Sunday, Eucharist by Eucharist, and thereby he gives us his peace. We are the ones who are permitted to walk out these doors knowing what Bonhoeffer knew: I am thine.

We belong to Christ. Let the world be as it must be, we will not despair or give up the good fight, for we belong to Christ, and his victory is already won. With this faith, we will have a chance to introduce some peace into our homes and our schools and our communities. Christ is risen, and he will make sense of our work and of our suffering, and one day we will find it all to have been very important.

Till then, may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.