

Peace of the Spirit
Rev. Janet Scott
First Congregational United Church of Christ
John 14: 23-29
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There they reclined together around the table. The men, with their feet still damp from that foot washing and last crusts of bread being chewed slowly as the Passover meal came to a close. There was a strangeness in the air. Their beloved Jesus was talking to them in his odd circuitous way. Betrayal? Why would he think they would betray him? They left everything behind to follow him, for goodness sake! And why does he keep hinting at his death?

This Passover meal, the same as others, yet, so very different, is the beginning of a chain of events that will change everything. These disciples don't want to hear what Jesus says.

"You are leaving? No, we have come so far! We want to stay together. Can't we just enjoy this Passover meal together? Don't talk to us about leaving."

But this is how it often is, isn't it? The disciples are getting a taste of living in this world where we often feel deep loneliness. We are abandoned, left alone, fearing the future and worrying that we are not ready for it.

"No," Jesus says. "The writing is on the wall. The end is near. But I won't leave you alone. God will send the Holy Spirit." This is part of the longer Farewell Discourse that Jesus offers his disciples on that fateful night. Jesus says, "I do not give you as the world gives."

Well, we know the world gives us many simple and soul nourishing things: orange-kissed sunsets, rhododendrons of red, pink, lilac, and white blazing their glory, the hug and wet kisses of grandchildren and a cup of strong coffee to grip and sip on a chilly morning. Also, the world gives us trouble, hard news, and disappointment.

We love and nurture our children only to see them grow up and leave us alone. We see relationships end in bitterness. We see the ravages of war and hunger. We see the homeless in our midst, hear the vestiges of racism and the continued oppression that holds our sisters and brothers down.

How does the world give? The world gives us pain and sorrow, the slow ache of depression and grief, and death that takes each and every one of us, always too soon.

I have had people say to me, "If you are not sad and afraid, you are not paying attention!" But I don't think that is how we are meant to live, do you? Jesus says there is more than sad and afraid.

The Message paraphrase of the Bible renders this verse as Jesus saying, "I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft." This world with all its fragile beauty leaves us feeling like the floor has fallen out from under us sometimes, feeling utterly alone, numb and helpless. And Jesus knows this when he looks at our lives, and Jesus knows this when he looks at the disciples gathered around him, and Jesus knows they will be filled with fear as they face the world, and yet, and

yet, he tells them, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you."

Jesus tells his huddled followers that he does not give as the world gives. He does not leave them the way they're used to being left. He leaves them with peace.

He leaves them with the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth that God will send. This Spirit will do many things. The Spirit will "teach the disciples everything" and will "remind them of all that Jesus has said." And the Spirit will bring to these disciples a peace that will allow them to un-trouble their hearts. In the face of the trouble this world gives us, Jesus assures us that we will have peace, and Jesus exhorts us to "take heart." The verb he uses here is *tharseo*. Although take heart is a beautiful and poetic translation, the Greek could be more accurately be rendered have courage.

Because Jesus is establishing peace in this world, we can have courage, even in the face of everything the world is throwing at us.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he is giving them peace, he knows what the next days, weeks, and months will look like to his followers. He knows that there will be days full of heartache and struggle and oppression and darkness and fear.

He offers peace to us not so that we can find shelter from the world. He offers us peace that we might be able to enter even more deeply into the world—that we would have the courage to live fully and boldly as his disciples, keeping his command to love our neighbors as ourselves. When everything around us is crumbling, Jesus has equipped us to keep our faith.

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives—do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

The peace Jesus gives is not just an emotion. Jesus does not call us to happiness, to unwavering gaiety or any other particular feeling. He is calling us to peace — a foundational sense of well-being that undergirds us regardless of how we are feeling at any given time. Jesus' peace is the unrelenting presence of godly hope, no matter what our emotions may be at the time.

It is the Holy Spirit of peace that gives us the impetus to help our neighbor, even when it feels risky. I see it around us, don't you? It is evident in the church families in Portland who open their homes to teens trying to stay in school but have no adult to help them. It is evident when donors come forward to donate a kidney for people they don't even know. It is evident when my daughter goes to developing countries to help women further their education in cultures that are not supportive of them. It is evident in our Forrest Watkins riding his bike through Asia to raise awareness of climate change. It is evident in the lives of Oscar Romero and other peace heroes who speak love and truth come what may. They have the peace to know they are doing the right things regardless of what the world says. They know that it is in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit that they will find their deepest joy.

Jesus was on his way to the cross. And we know this: The world can kill you, and the world may kill you. Having lived a life of love and kindness, Jesus' body was hung on a cross, because struggling for justice is dangerous, and because love is costly. There is good reason to be afraid, but Jesus says: "Do not fear. Do not let your hearts be troubled."

What Jesus has given us is a deep peace that, however the world looks, we can be confident that love is stronger than hate, that hope is more resilient than fear and despair, and that light can and will and does break through the darkness. We, too, are the disciples gathered in the upper room. We, too, are the disciples who live in a difficult world, holding pain and loss and sadness. And yet, we too are the disciples of hope and peace.

How?

We have the Holy Spirit in us and with us. We have a Spirit that is always at our back, that is the very presence of God, as close to us as our own breath, breathing peace and possibility into us. Even when our hearts are troubled, even when we are afraid, we will be people of love and courage in this world.

So what will we do? What acts of courage and faith will we take?

Will we make time and space in our lives for the Holy Spirit to guide us? Will we slow down enough? If we have a few quiet moments, could we just be? Listen, perhaps pray, instead of reaching for our cell phones, checking our email, or surfing the net? What if we just took that time to quiet our spirits, pray, and listen? I think that makes a profound difference in our sense of peace, our feeling of connection with God and appreciation of the gifts of life.

Then, with the gift of Spirit...

Will we love those who are difficult to love?

Will we have the courage to start a meaningful conversation?

Will we pray for those who persecute us?

Will we welcome the stranger?

Will we listen to the Holy Spirit and dare to follow?

How will we live out the commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us?

As we sense the peace Jesus gives, the power of our emotions can diminish, until even we who are afraid, can let go of that fear and dwell in the peace of Christ.

Jesus said God would send the Holy Spirit, and God has done that. As we listen with our spiritual ears, we can hear the Holy Spirit's guidance and counsel, and the reminder of what Jesus taught so that we can live in the peace Jesus gives, no matter how we're feeling otherwise.

Jesus promises us peace, not as the world gives, but that which is based on a power that overcomes *anything* that the world could possibly throw at us.

Let us open ourselves to God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit and ask Jesus to fill us with his peace.

Will you pray with me? O Holy Spirit, you were with the frightened disciples in the upper room. You were with the bereaved and traumatized disciples at the foot of the cross. You were with the abandoned disciples. Be with us now. Help us to receive the peace that Jesus has given us. Help us to truly be your agents of love in this world. Give us courage to move beyond ourselves. Give us courage to walk in this world. Give us courage to love as Christ has loved us. Amen.