

Sunday, May 22, 2022
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

John 14.23-29

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/981729255879482>

(Sermon begins at about 17:50)

“The Peace the World Cannot Give”

Wednesday morning I attended a meeting of CLUE—Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. An interfaith organization that “educates, organizes, and mobilizes the faith community to accompany workers and their families in their struggle for good jobs, dignity, and justice.”¹ As is pretty common at meetings of such organizations, you start off giving your name and the organization you represent. And more often than not, there is some sort of check-in question. The question at the start of Wednesday’s meeting was “How is your soul doing?” I don’t normally care much for check-in questions, finding them to be a bit contrived. But this question really resonated with me that morning. And I have returned to that question several times since then, sort of checking in, not with a group, but with myself. Checking in with my soul. Before I go any further with my sermon, I’m going to stop for a moment and ask you to ponder that same question. How is your soul doing?

[short period of silence]

While I would love to be able to take the time to go around the room and give those who want to respond the time and space to do so, that would not be practical. But I will note how my soul is doing—how it was doing on Wednesday morning as I answered and as it continues to be through to today. My soul is heavy. My soul is hurting. My soul is aching. For so many reasons. Because of the ongoing pandemic that we continue to have to navigate. Because of the one million people in this country who have lost their lives to COVID-19—way more than should have been lost. Because of the racially-motivated shooting in Buffalo last weekend that took the lives of ten people. Because of the politically-motivated shooting at a church in Laguna Woods last Sunday. Because of the on-going acts of gun violence and domestic terrorism throughout our nation. Because of the acts of violence against our brown and black bodied sisters and brothers. Because of the increasing political division within our government. Because of increased efforts in some parts of our country to deny some of our citizens access to basic rights—access to voting, access to health care, access to a livable minimum wage, just to name a few. Because of economic uncertainty, partly due to the pandemic, but largely due to greed. Because of the accelerating affects of climate change. And this is just the major societal issues. Add on top of that, pressures of work, family, and personal life.

I would venture that many of your souls are doing about like mine—heavy because of what we see going on around us right now. At the same time, some of your souls may be feeling light, joyful. And that’s wonderful, being able to be find joy, even in the midst of difficult times. Don’t get me wrong. I am capable of finding joy even in the midst of times such as these. But I’m just being honest about how my soul is right now. And even when my soul does feel heavy—which

is certainly not all the time—the one thing I don't do is lose hope. Because, as Christians, we are a people of hope. That is what this Easter season is about. Hope. The hope of forgiveness. The hope of salvation. The hope of new life.

On Wednesday, when I responded to the question of how my soul was doing, I then followed up by talking about how one of the things that gives me hope and helps lighten my heavy soul is communities such as the one I was in at that moment. A community of people of great diversity coming together to work for a better world. Not content to let things be as they are, but coming together to improve conditions, particularly for those who are most impacted by the various situations I named. That in the midst of societal angst and dis-ease, there are communities of people—like CLUE, like St. Gregory's—who come together to draw strength from one another and to draw on a greater strength.

It is this greater strength that Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel reading. What we hear today is part of his Farewell Discourse to his disciples on what we now refer to as Maundy Thursday. This is a continuation of last week's Gospel, where he said to his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you shall love one another" (Jn 13.34). The disciples are obviously anxious, since Jesus has told them he will be leaving them, but that they have this new commandment to fulfill. How are they supposed to do that without him? He then tells them that the Father "will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (Jn 14.17-18). In other words, God will send the Holy Spirit to be their ongoing companion to help them in their work. In today's reading, Jesus responds to questions from his disciples about what this looks like. How this will help them continue without him as their guide.

He responds that "the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14.26). He is seeking to assure his disciples, who are understandably unnerved and afraid, that even though he is going away, he is not abandoning them. That he will be with them in a new way. In a way that will allow for an even greater and ongoing form of intimacy and relationship. He summarizes this when he tells them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (Jn 14.27a).

As one commentator notes, in this statement "Jesus wants to leave his disciples with a profound sense of confidence and equanimity." The word "peace" being our translation of the Hebrew word *shalom*, which carries a far deeper meaning than just the absence of conflict. *Shalom*, peace, in this context, means "the presence of personal and communal well-being."² That adds greater significance to what Jesus is telling his disciples. To what Jesus is giving to his disciples. That in giving them the Holy Spirit to be an ongoing presence, he is giving them, leaving them with, a source for personal and communal well-being. This peace, this sense of personal and communal well-being, is nothing like the peace the world gives. For the peace the world gives, is momentary, is fleeting, is contingent upon outside influences. The peace the world gives—when it is able to give it—is fragile and can easily fall apart. The peace of the world is hard to achieve, and even harder to maintain. Because it is a peace that is based on the whims of those in power. Because it is a peace that is based on concern for the personal over and against the communal. Just look at what is happening in Ukraine because of the delusions

of one man hungry for power. Just look at what is happening regarding climate change because of the whims of corporations peddling fossil fuel. Just look at what is happening with racial tensions when some think they are better, entitled to more privileges, than others. Just look at what happens to our political discourse when some seek to stay in power by whatever means are necessary, even at the exclusion of the will of those they are sworn to serve. Nearly all of our social ills being because one group is more concerned with their own well-being to the exclusion and at the expense of communal well-being. When we forget to love one another as Christ loves us.

That's the peace the world offers. Which may be an uneasy peace for those who happen to be on the "right" side of an issue, the "right" side of a perceived line. But certainly not a peace—a spirit of well-being—that equally applies to all.

The peace that Jesus gives—the peace that he promises to his disciples and to us—is rooted in love. Rooted in the love of the new commandment Jesus gave his followers. To love one another as Christ has loved us. To love one another by being of service to others, by giving of ourselves for the sake of the other. To love one another by being more concerned with communal well-being than with personal well-being. Recognizing that when the communal well-being is cared for—when the well-being of all in society is considered—our personal well-being is automatically cared for. Or in one definition for the African concept of Ubuntu, "I am because we are." The recognition that "an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world."³ In short, that we are all intimately interconnected.

For Christians, this is achieved through following Jesus' new commandment to love one another as he loved us. Which can really only occur in an ongoing way when we allow ourselves to be guided and when we draw our strength from the Holy Spirit, given to be Christ's ongoing presence in the world. The key being "ongoing." That as followers of Jesus, we have access to this Spirit at all times. It is not just a source of guidance, inspiration, and strength for when things are difficult. As John makes clear in his Gospel, "the ultimate goal [of the Christian life] is not to merely follow Jesus or obey his commandments, but rather to live in Jesus as he lives in us."⁴ Jesus lives in us through his Spirit. We live in him by allowing ourselves to be guided and strengthened by that same Spirit.

It is that same Spirit that, when we allow it, when we tap into the extraordinary power Spirit affords, that we are able to experience the peace that Jesus desires for all of us. A peace that transcends and is deeper than any semblance of peace the world can offer. A peace that, in those times when the world does not seem to have any peace to give, in those times when our souls may be heavy, we can access to help us continue on in hope. A peace that is not diminished by the angst and dis-ease of the world, but if anything, a peace that gives us the hope that there is a better way. A peace that gives us the strength to take on those situations causing angst and dis-ease. Knowing that we are supported in that work by a greater strength; knowing that what we do is for purposes of communal well-being. A peace that comes with knowing that we are fulfilling what God desires for us. A peace that lifts up our own souls and allows us to share Christ's peace with those in need of that same blessing.

However your soul is doing today, I pray that the peace Christ gives provides you with hope. That the peace Christ gives lightens your soul and eases whatever burden you may carry there.

¹ <https://www.cluejustice.org/about/>

² "Coming and Going: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 6," SALT, May 16, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/22/coming-and-going-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-6>.

³ "Ubuntu Philosophy," Wikipedia, May 15, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_philosophy.

⁴ "Coming and Going."