

Second Sunday of Easter

April 23, 2017

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Peace

To the church of God in Dunn Loring, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

This morning I want to focus on three topics from John’s Gospel: Peace, Forgiveness, and the twin brothers Doubt and Fear, and how they impact our lives.

Peace: How you define peace? We as people describe peace in different contexts. There is peace among nations, peace between people, and then there is inner peace—the kind of peace that Jesus instills in us.

Peace among nations, is defined by Webster’s as: “...the normal, non-warring condition of a nation, group of nations, or the world.” Oh, how we wish peace was the “normal” condition in our world.

Peace between people, is described as a state of mutual harmony between people or groups, especially in personal relations—your neighbors. And further it is the normal freedom from civil commotion and violence of a community; a state of public order and security. And again, how we wish that the norm was freedom from violence and disorder. In order to achieve these first two kinds of peace, we need to start with the peace within ourselves.

Inner peace, is a state of being untroubled, tranquil, and content. True inner peace is beyond just not being anxious, or not being worried, or not feeling needy. Peace is a state of being where you feel truly safe, secure, and content, untroubled, and tranquil.

Forgiveness is not for the faint of heart. Forgiveness requires of us humility, and the courage to expose our vulnerabilities. Forgiveness is a grace granted to us, and our forgiveness of others is a gift we are asked to give.

Doubt and Fear: Interesting that Thomas was a twin, and Doubt and fear are also twin brothers. They are closely related to our shields of self-protection, and difficult to evict once they have established themselves. Doubt and Fear are squatters in the dark corners of the temple of our souls. John’s Gospel often uses language about darkness and light. Some contrasting people of the day or light are the Samaritan woman at the well and Mary in the garden. Examples of people of the darkness or night are Nicodemus, and the disciples “hiding out,” huddled in darkness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “Light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death. Victory is ours, victory is ours through Him who loved us.” Light overcomes darkness, love overcomes fear.

Each of these; peace, forgiveness, and doubt and fear, are things we know, feel, and experience. We act based on these, and our actions have causal effects in the real world. Act then out of peace and forgiveness, and hold in check your words and actions when grounded in fear and doubt.

Jesus came into a locked room that his followers thought no one could enter. He appeared in an instant, right there in their midst. Jesus appeared to a room full of doubting, fearful people who were lost, confused, and uncertain. Following a week riding an emotional roller coaster, from the high of Palm Sunday, to the plunge to the rock bottom, crushing reality of their abandonment and denial of Jesus, and finally His crucifixion. The disciples are once again shocked when Jesus transports Himself into the room with them. Poof! Imagine how you would feel if someone materialized in front of you. I think it would be like a Neanderthal experiencing fire for the first time. Or, as it was depicted in an old Star Trek episode, where Captain Kirk transports into the middle of a gathering of primitive people. (Insert look of shock with arms up here) Right now, I only wish I had a magician's skill and could produce someone out of thin air in front of you! If I did, I imagine you asking, "How in the world, did you do that?" How in the world, indeed! The creator of the world appeared to the disciples, and just as God in the story of creation breathed life into humankind, Jesus breathed into the disciples new life and peace.

The peace of Jesus, the breath of the Holy Spirit, came with instructions to forgive. I imagine them asking, "Seriously, after everything we have been through we need to forgive? "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."

This does not mean that if we do not forgive others, they carry their sin – it means, we carry the burden. When we fail to forgive, the burden is on us. It is like wearing a backpack, and each time we hold onto a sin of another and do not forgive it, we place a rock in our backpack. Time after time, year after year, if we do not learn to love, trust, and make peace – we will be crushed under the weight of a burden we piled on our own backs.

Jesus unlocked the door to their hearts, opened them and filled them with peace. God's peace enabled them to unlock the door to the room, and spread the message of peace and forgiveness to a waiting world.

How do we achieve inner peace? How do we begin to forgive? How do we overcome our doubts and fears?

Trust, I think it all begins with trust. From infancy, we learn to trust those who care for us – or sadly, in some cases, not to trust. But, the bottom line is that if love is the foundation of our lives, then trust is the framework. We have to trust Jesus, we have to trust each other, we have to be in tune with who we are, and we have to trust ourselves. Trust heals the wounds of doubt and fear, and trust makes a path for us toward the truth.

We seem to hang all doubting about the nature of Jesus on Thomas, but remember that Mary came and told the disciples Jesus was risen, and they locked themselves in a room. Thomas was not alone in his doubt, and Thomas did not trust his fellow disciples. Thomas did not trust Jesus standing in front of him. Thomas did not trust his own eyes – he had to touch the wounds. Thomas was overcome by fear and doubt feeding off each other in the depth of his soul. In the end, it's not the doubting that matters, it is the believing -- because we all doubt, and not everyone believes. Becoming a believer means pressing forward until you see the light and can proclaim, "My Lord and my God!" It matters less how you get there, it matters only that you move to get there. Like Thomas Merton says in his prayer: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that

desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Love is the foundation, and trust is the framework of our life in Christ.

What would the world be like if we loved God, loved and trusted one another, and peace was the “normal” state of our relationships? What if we opened our hearts, minds, and resources to each other, and the world could live as one? We will only get the kind of world we dream of having if we move toward making it that way. The answer to all of these questions comes from inside of us. And Love, Peace, Forgiveness, and trust are the building blocks. In other words, the peace and reconciliation we dream of, starts with us. It is our dream, it is God’s dream, and without God it is impossible, but God will only make this dream a reality with and through us.

I think that Martin Luther King may have pondered these questions before he said, “I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

Blessed are we, who see Jesus in and through each other, and believe. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.