

Peace in Forgiveness

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: John 20:21-22

“Jesus said to them, ‘Peace be with you’....When he had said this he breathed upon them 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 story is from the first Easter evening, an account of a resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room where the night before he died, the disciples had a last supper with Jesus. John tells us that despite various reports of the resurrection, the disciples were confused and still in hiding for fear of the authorities.¹ Much had happened in the previous week: from the triumphal entry and his equally stirring teaching in the Temple, to his horrible execution, then the reports of the women who went to the tomb Sunday morning and of the two disciples who had seen him on the road to Emmaus. Some were still skeptical, like Thomas. But that night he met them again, breathing into them the Holy Spirit. That means he put a little of himself and his Father into each of those who knew and believed in him.

That night he said “*Peace be with you*” twice, as if he thought they had not heard him the first time.² After the first time, he showed them his hands and feet, which tells us there is a connection between our peace with God and Jesus’ death. The second time he blessed them his peace, he gave them the Spirit and spoke about their power to forgive sins.³ There is a connection among these things: peace with God and peace with one another, the Spirit, his death, and God’s forgiveness. All are related. The night before he died he spoke about these things. On the day he died, he said, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”⁴ I want to point out three things we can learn from this Easter appearance in the upper room: his cross as the way to peace with God and a new relationship with God, the peace that comes from being forgiven by God, and the peace that comes when we forgive others.

First, there is a connection between the cross and his peace and forgiveness. Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae:

And when [we] were dead in trespasses...God made [us] alive together with him, when he forgave all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross....⁵

¹ John 20:19

² John 20: 19 and 21.

³ John 20:21-22.

⁴ Luke 23:34.

⁵ Colossians 2:13-15.

In his own last moments on the cross he forgave those who killed him. In the prayer in the garden he said, ‘not my will but thine be done.’⁶ Here was a man at peace—without the need to drag bitterness along with him to his death. There is in the Gethsemane prayer the final evidence of his oneness with God, but as Paul says, on the cross Jesus prepared the way for our oneness with God as well. Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, “Therefore, since we made right with God by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷ Jesus makes peace between us and him by forgiving us. His death is the sacrifice that leads to our forgiveness. After his death, he appeared to them in that upper room, bestowing his peace upon them and giving them his Spirit. Through faith in him, we are led to a new relationship with God in Christ.

Second, there is not only peace in the sense of an end to enmity with God but also an emotional peace that comes from being forgiven by God. This peace definitely comes from knowing we are forgiven by God. One of my first real encounters with people from Integrity House came maybe a dozen or more years ago. Mrs. Jean Williams, then director of Pilgrim Nursery School, had received a large mountain of wood chips for the playground out back. It was rather more than needed and she asked Mr. Kerr to send help to spread the pile over the playground. On a hot June or July day a crew of six or seven fellows arrived from Newark. They made quick work of it and were finished in the afternoon before the van came to collect them. So I took the crew to Magic Fountain in Bloomfield for an ice cream sundae. In the car I engaged the fellows in conversation. Almost all of them had come to Integrity after a jail term and I asked them what they had done that landed them in prison. Their answers were surprisingly honest and, frankly, a little startling to this minister. There were cases of rape, burglary, and murder, all in some way or another to support their previous drug habits. After the back seat admissions, the talk turned surprisingly religious. Most of the fellows had been brought up in Christian homes but a few were Muslim. First, one, then all of them pressed me with one question: “*Will God really forgive me?*” Their question was so simple, straight forward and direct. But without hesitation I told them the good news that if they turn to Jesus in faith, God would forgive them. I quoted to them a prayer I often say at gravesides, in the words of Jesus: “*I will never turn away anyone who believes in me.*” Knowing that promise brings great peace and comfort. It not only leads to a new relationship with God, but it gives us a whole new outlook. Like the peace Jesus found after his prayer in the garden, we no longer have to drag around the ball and chain of guilt, shame, and self reproach. The Psalmist sang, “*As far as the east is from west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*”⁸

There is a third aspect to peace in forgiveness. We talked often during Lent about the way Jesus is the model for us. Because he loved us, we ought to love one another. In the same way because he forgave we ought to forgive one another. There is great power in forgiveness. There is great burden in guilt, blame and recrimination. You add to your load when you lug anger around with you. You lighten your load when you remember you too were forgiven and you must forgive those who wrong you. This is one of the

⁶ Luke 22:42.

⁷ Romans 5:1.

⁸ Psalm 103:12.

great truths about the practice of Christianity. If you take it seriously, if you live the gospel, it will make your life so much easier! But this forgiving does not come naturally. It often requires much soul searching and prayer. As the hymn writer sang, “*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer!*”⁹ Do not forget when he said to those disciples in that upper room, *Peace be with you*, he also gave them his Spirit. That is, he gave to them (and us) a little bit of himself to live in us and help us with this challenge of forgiving others. His Spirit empowers us to be able to forgive those who hurt and wrong us. If we want peace we need to practice the love of God for others in our own lives. And to practice the love of God in our lives means we have to learn to let go of animosity and anger. We have to learn to forgive others, as he forgave us.

After he blessed them with peace the second time that night, he said to them, “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”¹⁰ And so I leave you with these three great truths to take home with you today:

First, Jesus’ cross is the way to peace with God and a new relationship with your creator. Second, there is great peace that comes when you know you are forgiven by God. And, third, there is great peace that comes in forgiving others.

There is peace in forgiveness. Is there one of you this morning who needs to stop fighting with God and come into a new relationship with him? Is there someone else today who needs to the blessed assurance that he or she is forgiven by Christ? I bet there are many here this morning who need to forgive someone who has wronged them. I encourage each of you to discover the peace of Christ anew this week.

Now, may the peace that passes all human knowing keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus.¹¹

End

Peace in Forgiveness.DOC

⁹ Scriven, Joseph. *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*.

¹⁰ John 20:21b.

¹¹ Philippians 4:7.