

Sermons from St. Thomas

## The Peace of Jesus

*Sixth Sunday of Easter, 1 May, 2016: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29*

“I just want my kids to know that love still beats out hate.”

These were some of the final words of Kelly Gissendaner, a woman on Georgia’s death row who was executed last fall. She had been sentenced to death for arranging to have her husband killed. While in prison she underwent a powerful religious conversion and became a source of inspiration and help to many women who were imprisoned with her. Pope Francis even appealed for clemency, but it was denied. In her final words she apologized again to her husband’s family. She told her kids she was proud of them and told them to keep loving others. She died singing Amazing Grace.

The words of Jesus in John’s gospel today were his final words to his disciples before his execution. Facing death, he gathered with his friends for a final meal. He took a towel to wash their feet. He gave them a new commandment – love one another as I have loved you. And he said *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* Even facing his own execution, Jesus offered peace.

I encountered a similar kind of peace this week. Episcopal clergy in this area made a visit to Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin. Stewart houses men who are detained over immigration issues. Deacon Lesley-Ann Drake, who was with us last Sunday, mentioned PJ Edwards and his work with immigrants in her sermon. PJ met us at the hospitality house he and others operate to provide a place for families of detainees to stay. Then he took us to Stewart to visit with detainees.

The man Martin McCann and I visited is from Northern Africa. He was detained for overstaying his visa. He expects to be deported eventually after his case works its way through the courts. He is Muslim, I am Christian, but we had a great conversation about our faith traditions. In spite of all that has happened to him, he said he is at peace. He is trying to use this experience to become more submissive to God.

And even if we don’t know people who are on death row or in prison, we all know people facing challenging illness or uncertain finances or struggles with relationships. Sometimes, issues like this cause understandable anxiety and fear. But often, people facing great crisis find themselves filled with holy strength and calm. The challenges of the present become a refiner’s fire, melting away all that does not matter. They respond with wisdom and courage. For them, the promise of Jesus has come true. Peace I leave with you.

What is this peace of Jesus that the world does not give?

We sometimes think of peace as the absence of conflict or trouble. Peace is what happens after the war is over, after the issue is resolved, after the trial is past. But that is clearly not what Jesus meant. Jesus spoke when the storm was brewing. Judas had just left the room. Peter was about to deny him. The worst was about to happen. But in the midst of this turmoil Jesus promised peace. Peace is not the absence of trouble.

And we sometimes think of peace as something we can grasp or obtain. Just take a deep breath. Or put on a happy face. Focus on the positive. These aren't bad things to do, but the peace of Jesus is not something we achieve through our own will or focus. Jesus was clear that peace is a gift. It comes from the Advocate, a wonderful word for the Holy Spirit. Peace is not something we give ourselves. We receive it. It is the gift of the advocating Spirit's presence with us in times of turmoil and fear. The peace of Jesus is not something we do to ourselves.

And we sometimes think of peace in passages like as inner peace, a sense of calm and tranquility. But Jesus likely had a broader view of peace in mind. The peace of Jesus was in stark contrast to the peace of Rome. You may have heard of the Pax Romana in world history classes. The peace of Rome was achieved by conquering others. It was peace through violence, peace through acquisition and control. And it was a false peace. The appearance of peace at the center of the empire came at the expense of the poor in the territories. Though Rome built great highways and aqueducts, the lives of the people were not whole and abundant. The poor paid heavy taxes and lived in grueling poverty.

Jesus offered a different kind of peace. Peace is not experienced in isolation. It does not come from getting ahead or acquiring more or dominating others. The peace of Jesus seeks peace for everyone. It is rooted in the Hebrew idea of Shalom – wholeness and abundant blessing for all creation. We see that vision of peace in Revelation. The writer imagines a place where the sun always shines and no one tells lies. The water of life flows from the throne of God through the city. The tree of life grows abundantly, and the leaves of the tree heal the nations. And there will be no more night, no more darkness, for the Lord God will be their light and he will reign forever and ever.

That is peace. The peace of Jesus is not just the absence of conflict. It is not something we achieve on our own. And it is not just an inner spiritual calm. Peace is the gift of deep wellbeing for all God's children. It is the confidence that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice and we will someday get there. That is peace. Peace is God's best hope for our world.

So Jesus promised his followers peace. He said it would come as the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, reminded them of all he had said to them. Remembering what Jesus said would remind his followers of God's dream and intention for this world. Remembering his words would help them trust that God was still working his purpose out, even in the cross, even in prisons, even in pain. That is peace.

Clearly, the peace of Jesus is not fully here yet. We are still waiting for its appearing. We trust it will come. But in the meantime we continue to do what Jesus said. We keep his word. We wait in hope.

And we find in those times of trial and struggle, the peace of Jesus breaks into this world. We see it in those who bear adversity with hope. We experience it ourselves when we are given strength to endure the things we thought we could never bear.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

In these moments of quiet, I ask you to do two things. Think first of an individual who is going through a time of challenge. Pray for peace of Jesus to enfold that person.

Now think of a situation in our world in need of peace. Pray for the peace that Jesus promised – wholeness and blessing for all God’s children.

Amen.

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