

“Peace Be With You”

John 20:19-31

Richard C. Allen

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Dedicated to Beatrice Coward, My Teacher

The post-Easter story we have for today is a story about empowerment. In this brief scene, Jesus DOES one thing and SAYS one thing. What he does and what he says are meant to empower the disciples for a ministry of peacemaking.

What he DOES is this: he breathes on them; that is, he breathes his Spirit into them. The Risen Christ infuses the disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit. It is like blowing air into a limp balloon. You blow with all you've got, and the balloon comes to life, takes on the form it was intended to take on! It's like an administration of mouth to mouth resuscitation! The Risen Christ breathes life and power and direction into a bunch of deflated, fearful apostles, resurrecting their hopes and dreams.

What he SAYS is this: “Peace be with you.” This utterance is really a blessing ritual. It is not unlike the moment in Shakespeare's Hamlet where Polonius blesses young Laertes, placing a hand on his head and saying, ‘to thine own self be true.’ In this case, it's the passing of a passion for peace from one soul to another, from the Risen Christ to the eleven apostles, from the Risen Christ to all who would ever choose to follow the Way. It's the handing over of the mantle from One who has modeled what peacemaking is all about to ones he is counting on to pick up the reins and to continue this sacred work. Breathing upon them and speaking these few words, Christ is blessing the disciples with power for doing the work of a peacemaker. He is giving the church its identity.

“Peace be with you” really means ‘peace be in your bones and in your muscles and in your feet and in your hands and in your voice and in your heart and in your mind and in your soul. “Peace be with you” means peace be so thoroughly in your veins that someone might accuse you of reeking of peace.

Like Limburger cheese that reeks of its identity as a first-rate dairy product, disciples of Jesus Christ are empowered, through this breathed infusion of Holy Spirit, to reek of peace.

When I think of being a peace-maker, empowered by the Holy Spirit, so many things come to mind. I’ll keep it to three! When I think of making peace I think immediately of offering and receiving forgiveness. I think of this personally, and nationally, and internationally. O what peace we often forfeit when we choose to withhold forgiveness from one who seeks it and when we choose not to seek it from the ones we have injured.

If you’ve read my piece in the April Connector, you know about my travel plans to Malawi in May. In that article I set out my goals to visit an orphanage and an AIDS clinic and a boarding school for girls. But I have another, unstated goal in mind, a peace-making goal, and I am praying for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this goal. My wildest hope is to stand in the pulpit of the local congregation of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian where I am known and where I have spoken before; to ask for forgiveness for my ancestors who wittingly or unwittingly participated in the slave trade, who knowingly or unknowingly contributed to what may be the darkest chapter in the history of humanity, the buying and selling of human beings for economic gain.

I do not claim to understand all of the complex origins of racism. But I do know that racism is the human stain that persists, the human stain that holds all nations and all races from being truly

free as God hopes us to be free. I can not speak for my nation or for my church. I will speak only for myself. But ever since seeing in an elementary school social studies book pictures of Africans paraded in chains to waiting slave ships, and pictures of slaves on the auction blocks waiting to see who will be the highest bidder, I have had a need to apologize, to tell somebody it was wrong, to ask forgiveness from the families whose loved ones were whisked away, never to be seen again. I am not so naïve to think this gesture will bring about world peace or that I would be nominated for the Nobel Prize, but I am mature enough to know that this is what I need to do to experience peace in my own soul. Whether this makes any sense to you or not, I invite you to take your own journey, your own sabbatical journey, to make peace by seeking forgiveness from the one you know you have injured. It's one constructive thing we can all do. It requires a little humility, plenty of courage, and a sure desire for peace.

When I think of peace-making, empowered by the Holy Spirit, I think of taking the initiative to face my fears. I tend to want to obliterate what I fear, wipe it off the map. When I was a kid, I feared red ants, so I would attack them with a croquet mallet or a sharp stick, obliterating their tunneled homes, thinking the world would be a safer place if I could just annihilate them! Thank God for Walter Tschinkel! Walter is the world's esteemed expert on ants! He has taught me how industrious they are! How earth-friendly they are! How cute they are! How they deserve my respect! Now, in the summer, when I'm mowing the lawn and I come upon an ant hill, I raise the wheels of the mower and pass by harmlessly!

What aspect of nature is it that you fear? Is it the deep forests with their secret lairs of bears and lions and weasels? Is it the desert with its lizards and snakes and box canyons? Is it the giant squids twenty thousand leagues under the sea? Is it the grizzly bears

along the Klondike River? Is it the black bears working their way down out of the Berkshires? Is it the white water rapids on the mighty Alagash? Is it the rattlesnakes out by Diamond Lake?

Before we pass legislation creating incentives to level the forest or to tame the rivers or to make extinct the monsters of land and sea, let us face up to our fears; let us make peace with God's Creation, with God's critters. May the Risen Christ breathe into us until we reek of peace, until we face our fear of the unknown, until the thought of obliterating wildlife and wilderness is erased from our brains.

When I think of peacemaking, empowered by the Holy Spirit, I think of opening myself to knowing people who are very different from the people with whom I grew up and different from the people with whom I typically hang out. If Jesus modeled anything, he modeled this! He was at his best peacemaking self when he opened himself to Samaritans; that is, to those living on the other side of the tracks! He was at his best peacemaking self when he opened himself to the mentally ill; that is, to those who acted as if they were possessed by demons. He taught us about peacemaking when he opened himself to known criminals, to tax collectors who collected more than taxes. He modeled peacemaking when he opened himself to the highest educated scholars and also to those who had never read a book.

When he opened himself to people who were different from his own family, who spoke different languages, who ate different foods, who valued different values, this is when he was modeling how to be a peacemaker.

When we know and respect and trust people who grew up on a different block or in a different tribe or on a different continent, or in a different religion, we are far less likely to drop a bomb upon their heads.

So, I am thrilled that many of you are intimately involved with the settlement of refugees from Bosnia. You are peacemakers! I am thrilled that many in our community are helping to re-settle an Iraqi military interpreter and his family in Glastonbury. You are peacemakers! I am thrilled that some of you are going to a Lakota Indian Reservation in June with Hawkwing to help repair houses. You are peacemakers. I am thrilled our mission board members cooked and served the supper at the South Park Inn last Wednesday and rubbed shoulders with homeless people, people very different from themselves! I am thrilled that twenty eight of us spent a week in March in Biloxi working side by side with people from Mississippi and Kentucky and New Hampshire. You are peacemakers. I am thrilled there is a young man from Liberia in our Confirmation class. He and they, together, are peacemakers! I am thrilled that the Sullivans are living in India for a time, that Beth Eliason taught in China for several years, and that a woman who sings in our choir is from Japan! You are all peacemakers!

What has been most transformative for me, personally, has been getting to know people who are openly gay, homosexual men and women who are different from me in terms of sexual orientation. I can imagine a time in my own youth when I might well have been the one to have murdered Matthew Shepherd. I was as homophobic as the culture where I was raised.

But along came Jane and Pam, along came Tom and Art, along came Kate, along came Bill, along came a host of gay people who allowed me to know them as God's sons and daughters, as human beings, as people of faith, as men and women who long for the same things I long for. In this way, I think of them and even of myself as a peacemaker.

It is not easy to do this work of peacemaking. It takes the empowerment that comes with the breath of God. So, my invitation to us all this morning is to imagine ourselves huddled in that post-Easter private room with the door locked, huddled with Peter, Andrew, James, John, Nathanael, Philip, Bartholomew, Thaddeus, Matthew, Thomas, and Simon who was called the Zealot; huddled there and letting the Risen Christ breathe upon us; infusing us with empowerment for peacemaking until we reek of peace. In the greatest of hope, I say, 'Peace be with you all!' Amen!