

**A Certain Peace**  
**John 20: 19-31**

Last Tuesday evening, I attended the 638<sup>th</sup> stated meeting of the Presbytery of Elizabeth. Several of you know that this is not one of my favorite things to do in ministry, but duty calls and I usually go. Discontent usually comes with me though.

First, getting to presbytery meetings is almost always fraught with problems. The directions are usually wrong and we travel in the thick of commuter traffic into the old New Jersey cities to the east. On Tuesday I went to Edison. Except for the wrong exit number off I-287, the directions were correct. But there was too much information – watch for the Office Depot, Home Depot, Petco, P.C.Richards, B.J.'s, the Ford Plant, the Dunkin' Donuts, the Board of Education building, Edison High School. I was so busy looking for all these places that I missed one of the turns. Something simple would have been more helpful.

Choosing not to attend any of the pre-meeting get-togethers, I sat alone in the sanctuary waiting for the general session to begin. The room was heavy with flowery air freshener. After some preliminaries, worship began at 7:30. The host church's praise team started us off with gathering music. Down came the screen and out came the guitar and keyboard. The lead singer was off-key and the music had no discernible melody or harmony, yet it wasn't chant either, just monotone. For me it was not a pleasant way of singing to the Lord.

I thought of something that had crossed my mind before: if a church is going to use contemporary music and Power Point to show the words, it needs to be done really well. Otherwise, it's no good at all. Music in

worship – should it be contemporary or traditional or blended? – is a real point of contention in churches these days. In fact, there are lots of points of contention in churches these days.

Part way through the service, although not listed in the order of worship, there was a time for the passing of the peace, although it was not called that. It was more like a 30-second stretch: walk around and greet one another, say hello, good to see you. We weren't quite sure what to do with this time, since most of us were used to a genuine Passing of the Peace, when we offer one another more than a welcome. We share a moment of Christ's love and forgiveness, of Christ's peace. So, on Tuesday, this few minutes was off the mark, I felt.

Worship service over, we launched into regular business, which included a presentation by the Reverend Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest from an ecumenical organization called GreenFaith, which promotes ecojustice, that is, environmentally responsible stewardship of the earth which God created. (Reverend Harper will be with us here at Peapack Reformed on Thursday, April 17, for another one of our dinner discussions – see the bulletin for more details.)

Harper's talk was riveting, but it brought me a different kind of unease, the kind that Jesus brought when he said he did not come into the world to bring peace but rather a sword. Call attention to the sin, don't gloss over it. Point out the wrongs, hold up the sufferings, don't hide the abuses. Injustice must give way to justice if there is to be real peace.

All in all, I did not leave that presbytery meeting with anything close to a feeling of peace in my heart. I did not feel the simplicity, pleasantness, genuine love and forgiveness, lack of contention, or justice that real peace would engender. I could not say, as the psalmist in the Call to Worship for

today said: *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.* **The peace of Christ was not present for me at that meeting.**

The peace of Christ was not present for Thomas either, at first, on that night a week or so after the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to his disciples. Thomas hadn't been there the first time Jesus came to their meeting, but he was there the next week. And discontent came with him - Thomas was doubtful and suspicious. "I won't believe it happened unless I see him and the wounds with my own eyes."

Of course what we know is that Jesus came and had Thomas touch the wounds so that his doubt would be lifted. And then the famous line from Jesus: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Often, on the Sunday after Easter when we read this passage from the Gospel of John, the topic of the sermon is this: believe what you cannot see; take the leap of faith; go beyond your doubt and reservations.

But today I would like to call your attention to another line, one that Jesus offered to the disciples three times in this one passage: "*Peace be with you....Peace be with you...Peace be with you.*"

What did Jesus mean by that phrase, by those four words? Did he mean may you feel good? Did he mean the kind of peace I was looking for in the presbytery meeting – a sense of simplicity, pleasantness, lack of contention, love, forgiveness and justice? Maybe. Or maybe something deeper and wider, something that wraps around all those ideas.

As a Jew, Jesus would have known the Hebrew understanding of the word for peace, which is *shalom*. The core meaning of *shalom* is "to be hale, whole, complete." By extension, *shalom* also does mean the absence

of war and conflict and contention because those are actions that break up and divide people from one another. But *shalom* is a positive notion; **peace is deep commitment - to the work of justice and healing and to the restoration of the creation to God's original intention.**

**Jesus Christ is *shalom*.** Jesus is the one who was sent into the world to heal the brokenness between God and humanity. When Christ entered that room where the disciples were meeting and said, "Peace be with you," I think he was saying that God's peace, *shalom*, had come there to be with them and would put an end not only to Thomas's doubting, but to any anxieties anyone had about Jesus.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" These words hold Christians together, those who came in the years and then centuries following Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, who did not see him in the flesh. The writer of First Peter says, *Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* The peace of Christ holds us together.

**The peace of Christ, the peace that is Christ, is what we strive for.** To heal the brokenness among people, to reconcile misunderstandings, to forgive, to restore wholeness to creation - and so then to ease contentions, to find simplicity, pleasantness and balance, and to come ever closer to justice – that is the peace of Christ.

**The peace of Christ overlays the diversity among us.** God knows we are all different. Witness the new members we will be receiving into this congregation this morning – men and women, older and younger, married

and single. This congregation of God's children is fluid and dynamic and multi-talented. But it is the one Holy Spirit that is alive among us. It is the peace of Christ that unifies us in God's work.

**The peace of Christ passes understanding.** The peace of Christ may not make sense to a world fraught with aggressive and selfish pride, torn by disagreements and managed under a 'me first' philosophy.

But the peace of Christ is not measured by human standards. Jesus said, also in John, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.* (John 14:27a)

The peace of Christ may seem an impossible goal to achieve, but our call is only to work on it and to live our lives not by achievement but by faith in the one who gives us life.

To God be all praise and glory. Amen and *shalom*.

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