

## **“Empowered: Then Comes Peace”**

June 6, 2021

Summer series – Fruit of the Spirit

Peace. We share the peace of Christ when we gather as a sign of who we are and the faith we profess - that peace comes from Jesus. There's something powerful about looking at one another and proclaiming peace for each other. It's a way that we come together as the Body of Christ - Christ who is the Prince of Peace.

I proclaim peace every week when I offer a blessing. "Go in peace, and make peace." I can't tell you when I started using that benediction or exactly why. It's a desire for peace within ourselves, with others, and with God. There's something about the fact that we have a part to play in making peace.

Peace on earth seems so far out of reach, and there are days when I question how God can usher in the Kingdom with the violence and divisiveness in our world. I talk to God and wonder how it's all going to shake out. How will God's everlasting peace come? When?

And I hear the challenge from the Gospel of John: is Jesus where I turn first when my heart is troubled? He's calling us to come to him, lean on him. This week, I found myself moved by a song lyric that one of our worship leaders sang during Annual Conference: Through it all, through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus... Is Jesus enough - sufficient - to receive me when my heart is troubled?

I know the answer, but it's worth considering. I have to start with peace in myself. Peace is one of the facets of the fruit of the Spirit. Even more, Paul says that living by the Spirit can overcome the works of the flesh - even hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy among others. That sounds like what we might consider the opposite of peace. The power of the Holy Spirit produces fruit in us that builds a strong faith and strong community - and helps us find peace in ourselves that then affects our relationship with others and with God.

God's power in the Holy Spirit is sufficient to help us overcome what separates us from God, even the insecurities that cause us to act in ways that are not peaceful. To live in the Spirit - to be guided by the Spirit - means peace is nurtured in us. But what is peace? What does Paul tell us about it? What did Jesus say about it?

Remember Paul is writing to the Christians in Galatia. They are a mix of Jews who have become Christian and Gentiles who have become Christian. There is dissension over issues of faith and salvation. They are divided and seem to be quite entrenched in their positions. There is not unity in Christ as there should be. Instead, they are concerned about whether Gentiles need to be circumcised before they can truly accept

Christ. They are not coming together around the table (we'll come to the table today), but separating themselves. It is a classic "us" and "them" problem.

It is important to note that peace comes after love and joy. As we've been studying this list of fruit, it's interesting that love, joy, and peace come first - each one is closely connected to the gift of salvation that we receive in Jesus Christ. Agape love that Jesus embodies as he offers himself for the world, joy (not happiness, but deep and lasting joy) that is "grace recognized and grace received" and joy that brings the assurance of God's love and faithfulness and calls us to live holy lives and give thanks and praise to God. Love, joy, and then comes peace.

The Greek word for peace in Galatians 5 is eirene.

SHOW SLIDE: Greek word for PEACE - EIRENE - εἰρήνη

It's where we get the name Irene. It is translated as peace, quietness, or rest. And we find the same word throughout the New Testament. Jesus uses it as he heals people - mainly to describe a sense of inner peace. Eirene - peace - is the common greeting of the letters in the New Testament. We find Paul and others offering one another "grace to you and the peace of God" over and over again as they communicate with each other. And they end their letters with calls to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" and SHOW SLIDE: Philippians 4:7 - "the peace of God, which passes all our understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

That phrase is important - the peace of God. Peace comes from God. True quietness and rest that we experience in our souls comes from God. Jesus confirms this in the Gospel of John: "My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Is Jesus where I turn first? Is Jesus' peace what I'm seeking?

So, there's an assurance that what Jesus offers is not what the world is offering. As he is journeying closer to the cross, the peace that he offers is not the military victory that the people expected the Messiah to bring. The peace he offers will come from offering himself in agape love as a sacrifice for the whole world. He will die on the cross to bring peace to our souls as we put our faith in him as Savior and Lord.

Jesus also highlights the connection between peace and fear. Jesus says, "do not be afraid." Remember when the promise of the Messiah came after years of waiting? When Mary and Joseph were called to be a part of God's plan for salvation in Jesus? The angel used the same phrase "do not be afraid." The peace Jesus offers is connected to who he is. He is Messiah, and he will suffer for the sake of the world. And those who follow him will know suffering and persecution, too.

We may not want to hear it, but it's a part of following Jesus. We should not be surprised about it. We should not have unrealistic expectations about what it means to

follow Jesus, but sometimes we do. The peace Jesus offers is not magic idealism or a free ride without conflict or difficulty. Jesus offers peace right then - not a far-off promise to come eventually - but right then in their midst. Jesus offers peace in the present tense. SHOW SLIDE: John 16:33

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

Some of us might have given up the notion that peace is even possible right now - today. Maybe we don't claim to have mortal enemies, but we struggle with people who have different ideas and beliefs, people who have hurt us, those we're at war with, and even people close to us. We desire peace in our lives and our relationships, but it seems elusive and out of reach. Again, it's not easy or quick. If we're struggling, perhaps it's time to allow God in. The peace that Jesus offers isn't just for a time down the road - or the peace that comes only with eternal life. There's a promise of peace for right now.

It is peace that works powerfully when we pray for and when we seek justice in the world. Almost always in Scripture, peace and justice are connected. They go together and depend on each other. True peace can't be achieved when injustice stands. Justice is tied closely to peace because making things right - making things just - brings a sense of peace and wholeness. Can we really have peace in ourselves when others are suffering injustice?

Even in these days when we talk unity and peace, we have to be honest about the reality of injustice and inequity. We want peace and pray for peace, but we have to seek justice, too. It's work to look within ourselves and see what needs to change in us so that things can change around us. The fruit of the Spirit seems like a great list of characteristics, but when we dig more deeply, we realize that it requires us to allow God to nurture something new in us.

And Jesus continues to reaffirm the offer of peace after resurrection. The first word he says to his disciples after resurrection is "Peace" - "Peace be with you." The risen Jesus brings peace - peace that frees us when we're fearful. But that peace comes because we have a relationship with God through Christ, and we know the challenge he offers as we come to him and commit ourselves to peace with justice. Peace does not simply come from inside of us, but because of God's love at work in us.

Many people are seeking peace. Some people want "inner peace." We seek guidance and direction or some sense of purpose. We try to find it by taking spiritual expeditions or the next exercise craze or the next drug that will free the mind and give comfort. We think that we'll find it in the world, and yet Jesus is clear that his peace is different than what the world gives.

Peace comes in knowing that we don't do all of this on our own. We make a

commitment to Jesus. We love Jesus. We trust Jesus. We put our faith in Jesus. And we recognize our need for Jesus. We repent of our sin, ask for forgiveness, and seek to follow him. We seek to live in peace with one another - quit provoking and envying each other.

And we do have a deep joy and peace that doesn't waver even when we face the reality of death, grief, illness, brokenness, pain, and despair. It's always there as an undercurrent of our human lives. The peace that Jesus offers - the fruit of the Spirit - transforms our lives into a powerful witness to the glory of God.

Paul's letter focuses on freedom in Christ. But freedom isn't license, and we know that freedom can be taken too far. That's where the works of the flesh come in. Freedom to love as we choose can turn into "love" that seeks satisfaction for ourselves without thinking of others, and that's what agape love is.

Joy must be grounded in our acceptance of God's salvation as a free gift and not anything we earn. Peace comes from knowing that whatever happens, we can rest in God. Nothing external can shake it. It doesn't mean we won't struggle. It doesn't mean we won't question. It doesn't mean we won't have seasons when we feel far away from God. But peace - the peace of God - is knowing that God is not far from us.

Elisabeth Eloit says, "Restlessness and impatience change nothing except our peace and joy. Peace does not dwell in outward things, but in the heart prepared to wait trustfully and quietly on [God] who has all things safely in His hands." It's a nice thought, but it comes from a deep place. Eliot worked for many years as a missionary in very dangerous places in Ecuador. That kind of peace is cultivated as we put our lives in God's hands.

The popular band Switchfoot has a song called "You." The lyrics read: There's always something in the way/ There's always something getting through/ but it's not me/ it's You, it's You/ sometimes ignorance rings true/ but hope is not in what I know/ it's not in me/ it's in You, it's in You/ it's all I know/ I find peace when I'm confused/ I find hope when I'm let down/ not in me in You...My peace I give to you.

Peace comes when we trust God. Not just in a few things, but in all things. It doesn't mean that we don't act, but there's a deep undercurrent of trust. We act with attention and intention. And it is something we share with one another as we witness to God's faithfulness. Peace is something we offer to others in the name of Jesus Christ. Peace is something cultivated in us as we speak of God who loves us, saves us, and transforms us - and as we speak of God's desire for all people to be made whole and to experience new life in Christ.

Peace is what we share as we seek justice, and there's no lack of need for peace with justice. Look at the stories we've heard even this week. My heart breaks for

communities in Canada where bodies of Native Americans have been found. My heart breaks for people in our country who continue to experience the sin of racism. My heart breaks for people I know, including a colleague from Korea, who spoke of her concern for herself and her family during this past year.

What does justice look like - what does peace look like - when people are experiencing hate and vitriol? I pray that the words of Scripture ring true for us:

So may the peace of Christ rule in our hearts...so that we live boldly without fear, full of faith, and as those who seek justice. Thanks be to God. AMEN.