

“A Place at the Table (Peace)”

December 5, 2021

The Inn: Housing the Holy series – Holy Communion

Today we've lit the candle of peace. Last week was hope, and this week is peace. I'll be honest...talking about peace today after talking about hope last week falls flat. I've been struggling to feel both of those, though I know hope and peace are more than mere feelings. Still, they seem elusive in this moment. I know the “right” answer - that hope and peace are ours in Jesus Christ. I believe that, and I stand firmly on that truth, but I join with many others who are weary - and wanting to grasp any small bits of hope and peace that I can.

Though we read this beautiful poetry from Baruch, who has a connection to the prophet Jeremiah (maybe Baruch was his scribe), I'm more tempted to go back to Jeremiah who says that there are some who are crying ““peace, peace”” when there is no peace.” I can't stand before you and offer a word of empty peace today. I can't say, “Don't worry; it will all be fine.” That's the promise, but it's not fine right now. This isn't the way it should be.

And I don't want to become desensitized to the reality we're living in. The events of this week, including the news of a school shooting in Oxford, hit me hard. And yet we know violence is an ever-present reality for others who live with daily threats - in communities nearby and in places around the globe. Tragically, there are people we know who could give a list of names of loved ones who have died because of gun violence. This isn't the way it should be. Theologian Howard Thurman prayed this prayer, and it's become poignant for me this week: *Sensitize our spirits, our Father. May we not shrink from the present intensity of our experiences lest we turn away from the redeeming power of Thy Perfect Love. Amen.*

In our country, there are more civilian firearms than people. Friends, when it comes to gun violence, I know I don't want it to increase. No matter our thoughts and feelings, I hope we can agree on that. We must be responsible, law-abiding, safe, and well-trained if we choose to own a firearm. And I hope that we will be pro-active in advocating for laws that protect people and prevent gun violence as much as possible. I pray that we will seek out ways to curb violence as a way of life - starting with ourselves. I pray that we'd reach out to our communities to invest in education, mental health care, and programs that instruct us on how to communicate and care about each other better. All of those things make for peace.

And we talk about peace as we talk about making room - this time at the table. We want everyone to have a place. We want to offer safe space for people to be and to

grow and to nurture their relationship with God - *a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing*. We want to make room for Jesus - and we should make room for others to have a place at the table of the Lord.

But I can't help to think of families that are facing empty chairs around their tables. There are tables with empty chairs for those who have been the victims of violence. There are other tables with empty chairs because of other losses - some to illness, some to the natural order of life and death. Whatever the loss, grief is real. The pain of an empty chair is real.

Today we stand in the tension of where we are right now - knowing that peace doesn't come easily. We know it's possible. We know it's promised, but it is still yet unseen - and it may seem far off today - at least it feels that way for me. I've felt the ebb and flow this week, and I've found myself thinking about the prophets, especially those who prayed for God to come down. Even more, peace requires something of us - to admit that we need it.

So, we sing songs of Advent like "O come, o come, Emmanuel." *Come, God with us. Set us free from this mess we're in. Help us. We can't do this alone. We know we need you.* We know why you were born - to show us the power of God with us, to bring salvation. We know that you will come again and bring the fullness of God's Kingdom even as you call us to work for it right now, even when - and especially when things aren't the way they should be.

We know that you call us to look around - to be sensitive to the devastation and pain - and to act in ways that will make it less so, and make this world more just, more peaceful, more compassionate, and more caring. There are things that need to change - things need to be different - we need to be different - if we're truly living out our call to follow Jesus - and to welcome him and make a place at the table for others. As we're making this Advent journey, the need to repent and return to God is real - and even raw today.

We'll talk more about John the Baptist next week. He shows up in Advent - repent and return to God. He's like the unwelcome guest that nobody wants to hear. Who invited him?

Jim Wallis talks about singing our way back to hope - and the power of the songs we sing in this season: "Because our only hope is that light *does* come into the darkness, that this child born in an animal stall is still more important than all the kings and rulers, that the "lowly" are closer to God than all the "high"-placed people that we are forced to watch and listen to all the time."

I found my heart moved as I listened to the words of the songs at the Singing Christmas Tree. There were moments when I was singing my way back to hope – or at least hearing words that offered some hope and peace.

I can see the light of a clear blue morning... a song by Dolly Parton

Let the light shine/ In the window/ When you think it's almost gone, there is still hope. It's a Hanukkah song.

I know my Lord will make a way... a beautiful Gospel song

And from our tradition – Charles Wesley's Hark! The Herald Angels Sing:

Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace/ Hail the Son of righteousness

Light and life to all he brings/ Risen with healing in his wings

It was balm for my soul, and a challenge for my spirit to know that deep down I claim the promise of hope and peace. Peace begins with seeing one another as God's beloved. Some would say you can't have true peace until there is justice, and it's true.

Last week, we talked about how sometimes it's hard to make room – to truly welcome guests. The same can be true when we talk about making more space at our tables. *Will there be enough space for me if I scoot over? Will there be enough to go around if I let someone sit?*

Even today, we sang about preparing for Christ's coming - *Love the Guest is on the way.* Hospitality is an Advent discipline - preparing our hearts for the coming of Christ. Perhaps you've had to make more spaces at your table - adding card tables to extend the space - or using another room to give everyone a place to sit. Maybe you've had that experience of looking for a place to sit in a crowded lunchroom and hoping they'll be room for you. Or maybe you've been the one to sit with someone who was alone. There's a song by Sidewalk Prophets called "Come to the Table" that says, *We all start on the outside/ The outside looking in/ This is where grace begins...*

How do we welcome those who are in need of a safe space? Baruch is reflecting on the experience of exile - homelessness and displacement - the life of a refugee. To throw off the clothing of oppression and dress in God's glory is a powerful image when we remember that clothing is really shelter for those who are homeless; it's all they have. To wrap up in justice - and to know you have a new name - Peace that comes with Justice.

This is an assurance that God gives us the things that matter most - that we build peace together when we care for the most vulnerable, make space, and remember that we grow closer when we share a meal together - and come to the table. This happens when we make space for our neighbors - when we share a meal at the table. Maybe you've grown closer to someone when you invited someone to lunch.

Powerful things happen when we share space at the table. It's happened to me in our mission and ministry – like at Supper House. I sat across from a veteran and heard him say how thankful he was for a meal and a place to sit with others. I remember sitting across from our guests from Family Promise and hearing their stories. I was more aware of their struggles, and it changed my perspective.

If we want to make a place at the table, it means knowing that there is enough for us - getting away from a scarcity mindset and allowing Love to guide us and remind us that there is enough. It means seeing others as important and worthy and accepted and loved – no matter what.

Paul offers an encouraging word to the church people in Philippi. It's a love letter to the church, even as Paul writes from prison. *God is at work in you. God will keep working in you - helping you to do the right things that will point the way to God and give God glory.* Love will find a way to make more space at the table. That's what Love does; Love makes more space.

And when it comes to the table where we receive God's grace in bread and cup, we need to remember whose table it is. It is Jesus who invites us - not because we're worthy, but because we need to come to the table and experience the love of God – love that transforms the world.

Advent is a time to remember just how much we need Jesus – and how much the whole world needs Jesus. That's not a platitude; that's our charge - to be clear about whom we love and trust as Savior and Lord, to be committed to making this world more like God's Kingdom - seeking peace and doing justice.

We come to the Lord's Table this morning – a table extended far and wide. But coming here means looking at ourselves. Our Methodist ancestors would come to Holy Communion professing that they were at peace with God, reconciled with their neighbors, and making progress in holiness of heart and life. That's why we take time to confess our sin before we come to receive these gifts of God. We admit our need for grace and peace that only God can give. And we receive assurance of God's forgiveness, and that infuses us with new life in Jesus Christ. It means hope and peace for each day – even in the midst of chaos.

It's been difficult to find those moments of hope and peace. But I pray that this is a moment when hope and peace are realized again. And even if it's just a small moment, maybe it's enough for us to keep going and doing the work to make this world better because it needs to be better.

God, help us. Let us pray...