

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

UNTRoubLED, UNAFRAID

Some among us would consider spending time fishing to be the most peaceful of experiences. Separated from the hustle and bustle, from that which troubles a heart, being there next to, in, or on top of the water opens the possibility of a sense of oneness with nature accompanied by the thrill of a good catch. But this Jesus we follow called a good many of his followers away from fishing nets. While these former fishermen were with Jesus, they wouldn't always know where they would be staying the night. They weren't always sure where their next meal would come from. Before they began to follow Jesus, they were separated from many of the problems that beset other people. In following him, he always led them right toward those who were in greatest need and in the deepest trouble. It was not easy going into such situations. But there was an assurance they had as long as Jesus was with them. He would know what to do in whatever situation arose. His great capacity to love, his gift in analyzing situations, his power to enable broken people to become whole, all gave his followers confidence in the uncertain situations into which they went.

So it had to be troubling, frightening for those followers to hear Jesus talk about how he would soon no longer be physically present with them. He was their leader. He was their inspiration. They continued to learn so much from him. What would they do without him? They didn't know what to do! But Jesus said the very Spirit of God would be with them. He said that his peace would be with them. It was different from the kind of peace that was available elsewhere. That kind of peace required an external situation that was pleasant in order for someone to be at peace. But Jesus' peace would enable his followers to have internal peace in spite of what was going on for them and around them. Some of those to whom Jesus was speaking would end up in jail as a result of their faith. Even when they would be neck-deep in difficulties, even when their lives were on the line, Jesus' peace, Jesus' presence, brought by the Holy Spirit, would be with them. He said there would be no reason for their hearts to be troubled or afraid. Actually, the word translated 'afraid' is different from the word in the original Greek having to do with fear. Some understand the line as offering encouragement – literal en-courage-ment, where Jesus tells them their hearts won't have reason to lack courage. A firefighter who goes into a burning house might be afraid, but he or she does not let fear limit what is to be done.

When we 'pass the peace of Christ' in worship as we did a few minutes ago, we do so right after the expression of assurance of God's pardon for our sinfulness. The peace of Christ blessing that we offer to one another is recognition of the peace Jesus opens to us in our relationship with God and with one another. But Christ's peace goes beyond that, with an assurance of Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit wherever we go in ministry. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, as his followers prepared to go out in different directions to carry forth Christ's ministry, as they wondered how they would proclaim the gospel, as they realized that their lives would be on the line, imagine them saying to one another before they went out, "The peace of Christ be with you," with the response being, "And also with you." They would find some tough situations out there, but the peace of Christ would not leave them.

I appreciate Cory Atwood alerting me about the story that came out this past week of a man who served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. That service had left its scars. For the physical scars, retired Sergeant Joe Serna has two purple heart medals to show for his wounds as he survived an IED and a suicide bomber. But neither of those instances was the scariest moment for him. That came when he was riding in an armored truck with three other soldiers. They were following a creek when the dirt road beside it gave way and the truck went into the creek and started filling with water. One of the other soldiers unhooked Joe's seat belt and released his body

armor and then guided him to an air bubble within the wrecked vehicle. He couldn't find a way out and the water was rising past his waist and then past his chest until it finally stopped rising when it was up to his neck. Sergeant Serna was the only soldier who survived the incident. After that point, one of the indications of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was that he could not stand being in small, cramped places.

Upon retirement, Joe tried to medicate his emotional trauma with alcohol. He got convicted of drunk driving and part of his probation requirements were that he was not allowed to drink. After failing a urine test, he lied about it to Judge Lou Olivera. The Fayetteville, North Carolina judge, saw the man he had seen repeatedly, trembling before him. He sentenced him to a night in jail because he knew Joe needed to be held accountable. But the judge knew the man well enough to know that being in a tight jail cell by himself would be an excruciating experience. Judge Olivera drove Joe to the jail where he would serve his one night sentence. As Joe sat down on the cot in the one-man cell, he heard the door rattle open again and saw Judge Olivera escorted into his cell, where he sat down on the cot beside him. A guard locked the door. Joe asked the judge, "You are here for the entire time with me?" The judge replied, "Yeah, that's what I'm doing." The judge is a gulf war veteran himself and he was concerned what a night in isolation would do to Joe. They talked the whole night after which Joe said, "The walls didn't exist anymore. He brought me back to North Carolina from being in a truck in Afghanistan." ¹ Joe was in a small, cramped place, even more cramped with the two of them in the one person cell, but the presence of someone in whom he could trust made it a transformation experience.

It is a tough world out there. The world has its version of the kind of peace it offers – perhaps peace that comes in a bottle or peace that requires being behind something like Baghdad's Green Zone walls, neither of which offer lasting or deep peace. But Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. So do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be lacking in courage. I continue to be with you through the Holy Spirit. Even when you are up to your neck in threat or pain or turmoil, they will not be able to take away the peace I give to you." So the next time you 'pass the peace of Christ' to one another, think about the words of great blessing you are offering to each other. Warner, I say not only "the peace of Christ be with you." On the authority of Christ himself, I say, "the peace of Christ is with you."

¹The account of the story is taken from these two sources: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/on-the-road-judge-gives-former-soldier-unusual-sentence-for-probation-violation/> and <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/04/22/a-judge-sentences-a-veteran-to-24-hours-in-jail-then-joins-him-behind-bars/>