

"THE GIFT OF PEACE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 17, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

A man went to see his doctor to find out why he was having such severe headaches. The doctor ran some tests and after a few hours called the man into his office and said,

"I've got some bad news for you. Your condition is not at all good. In fact, it's terminal..."

"Oh, no!" responded the man. "How long do I have?" "Ten" began the doctor. "Ten what?" interrupted the patient. "Days? Months? Years?" "Nine" said the doctor....and still counting..."eight, seven, six, five...."

Now there's a man having a bad day. There's a man living in panic and not in peace. Let's face it. True peace is very difficult to find in this world of ours. Few are the people who find that center of calm that allows them to cope successfully with life. Some people never find it. "Get the center right" E. Stanley Jones...that great missionary spirit of the nineteen forties...was fond of saying. "Get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself". I like that and for the Christian, Christ is the center.

Jesus said to His disciples,

"Peace I leave with you. 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."

What is the nature of that peace that Christ brings and offers us and how do we find it and keep it? Let me suggest four ways in which Christ brings to us "that measure of peace that passes all human understanding...."

THE PEACE OF A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

The first peace that Christ gives us is the peace of a clear conscience. Many who toss and turn at night do so because of guilt over past actions, and many of these people do not even realize that guilt is their problem. We would do well to remember this...that whenever we do wrong and go "against the grain" of life, it takes its toll on us.

They say that Brendan Behan, an Irish playwright virtually drank himself to death. His biographer claims it came from an unrelenting sense of guilt. Behan went to England on a mission for the IRA. One day he planted a bomb that was set to go off during the rush hour. It did and it exploded as a young woman with her baby was passing by. Both died in the blast. Behan was overwhelmed with guilt for killing that innocent woman and her baby. As time went on he increasingly tried to drown his memories and silence his conscience in a bottle, but without success. Yes...guilt is a terrible thing.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had a guide in life...a guide that will help us avoid those things that we know are wrong, those things that fill our lives with so much regret? Christ has promised us such a guide. For us, that guide is the Holy Spirit...God's presence in our lives.

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives....."

Near the end of the fourth week on his first trip across the Atlantic, Christopher Columbus was called to the helm by the night steersman. With fear in his voice, he told Columbus that their compass had gone astray. When checking against the stars, it did at first seem that way, but Columbus thoughtfully surmised that they had come far enough west and south to have caused the star overhead to have moved. He instructed the steersman to hold the course due west by the compass and not the stars. The next morning when the sun rose, calculations proved the compass to be accurate.

"If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teachings" said Jesus and His teachings are a moral compass which will guide us toward that which is right and away from that which is wrong. But even more than that. Christ has given us His spirit not only to guide us, but to empower us to do what we know we should do. After all it is no use or of little use knowing what is right if one is not empowered to do what is right. That assurance comes across to us in the 14th chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus said,

"The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father
will send in My name, will teach you all things
and will remind you of everything I have said to
you...."
(John 14: 26)

This is the first peace that Christ has promised to give us. Call it, the peace of a clear conscience and it is highly important that we have this.

THE PEACE OF FORGIVENESS

The second peace that Christ has given us is the peace of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a much-needed commodity in our world and the forgiveness of Christ works on two levels.

First, it does give us the knowledge and the assurance that we have been forgiven. And it is tremendously healthy for us to recognize that the past is past. That God has forgiven us our sins. They are "blotted out". They no longer exist. We can all enjoy the benefits of a new beginning.

Writing in Hope for Tomorrow, Hazel Goddard has shared this one with us. It's from her childhood years. Apparently her grandfather had horses and every now and then the two of them would go out riding. As Hazel was riding from the barn one Saturday afternoon, a white chicken stood in the path and would not move. Out of curiosity, Hazel got down from her horse to see what was wrong. The chicken had her head buried in her feathers and was "picking away" at herself, oblivious to all around her. At that point, Hazel's grandfather cautioned her not to touch the hen, explaining that this hen had a sickness that made her "pick at herself" all day and she would not move from that spot. Hazel knew that her brothers would soon be coming down the path on their horses and so she built a little square of boards around the chicken and left her to her misery. Hazel Goddard went on to say this...

"What a picture of the 'guilt-ridden' Christian who, because he is more aware than the unbeliever, picks at himself constantly...."

We need to accept God's acceptance of us. We need to quit picking at ourselves over sins God God forgave us long ago. We also need to forgive others. How many of us are hurting right now because we are filled with resentment toward someone else. There's a bit of that in all of us, I'm sure...

Deep in our hearts there's a simmering desire for revenge, and this seething turmoil robs us of our peace. This happens to us all at some time or other in life and we get all "filled up" with anger and resentment. We've been asked before to "forgive, to forget, forever". Good advice.

I heard about a colleague who had this problem. He woke up one morning, looked out the window and saw a dead donkey in the front yard of the parsonage. He didn't have the slightest idea of how that dead donkey got there, but he knew it was up to him to do something about it. He called the Sanitation Department and got a busy signal. So he tried the Health Department. They put him on to several other agencies, but no one seemed able to help him or even interested. And so in desperation, he even called the mayor of the town and asked him what could be done. The mayor, not wanting to be bother, responded rather testily:

"Why bother me with your problem. You're a clergyman. It's your job to bury the dead." Whereupon the pastor just lost his cool and snapped back at the mayor, "Well...I just thought I had better notify the next of kin". All of us can relate to his feelings of frustration.

In Rome stands the lovely Fountain of Rivers which was created by the sculptor, Bernini. Bernini despised another artist named Borromini, the designer of the Church of St. Agnes, which, ironically stands opposite Bernini's fountain. To deliberately insult the artist whom he despised, Bernini carved one of the statues in the fountain with a hand covering its eyes as though it could not stand to look at the church. And then, to add insult to injury, he fashioned another figure with its hands up in panic as if it were afraid that the church might fall on it.

That was about 300 years ago and the legacy of that "ill-will" still lives on. We laugh at such pettiness, but it is no laughing matter when you are angry at someone else. It may cause you to destroy not only the other person, but yourself as well. We need the Christ spirit to help us forgive and to forget....to release us from the burden of our own negative feelings and to restore a new heart within.

So far then: Christ gives us the peace of a clear conscience. He also gives us the peace of sins forgiven, both the sins we may have committed against God and the sins other have committed against us.

THE PEACE OF QUIET ACCEPTANCE

The third peace that Christ gives us is the peace of quiet acceptance. Many are in turmoil because they are dissatisfied with their life situation. They think to themselves, "Oh...if only...if only I had this, or if only...I had that, then I would be happy". They ignore the very obvious truth that happiness does not come from what we acquire or even what we accomplish. Peace comes from within. Happiness is an inside job.

Tennis star, Boris Becker, was at the very top of his tennis game, yet he was on the brink of suicide. He has written...

"I had won Wimbledon twice before...once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions

that I needed....it's the old song of movie stars and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything... and yet they are so unhappy. I had no inner peace...I felt like I was a puppet on a string..."

Becker's not the only one to have such feelings...to have that sense of emptiness. The echoes of a hollow life pervade our culture. Many there are who want what they cannot have and they long for that which is beyond their reach and they lust for that which is not permitted.

Some of this restlessness, I am inclined to think, is of divine origin. This restlessness in our nature causes us to do more and to be more than we would under normal circumstances. The people who have accomplished great things in this world have been driven...driven by a passion that goes a bit beyond the ordinary. And such restlessness does exact a price. The price is the restless heart, the uncalm spirit and sometimes a profound unhappiness. So we should pray for the spirit of content that St. Paul knew of when he penned that line,

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need....and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength".

(Philippians 4: 11-13)

Call this the peace of acceptance...but St. Paul had discovered it and had found it. First-hand, he knew the peace of Christ and what a blessing that can be to us when we find it.

THE PEACE OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES

with us. The final peace that Christ gives us is the peace of God's presence in our lives. And when God is with us, we find that measure of peace and of inner quietness that passes...yes, that passes all human understanding. We find peace regardless of what life may throw at us.

So far, then, three for four.

There's a fourth to take home

The History Channel recently took us back to the Germany of the thirties and touched briefly on the life of a German pastor by the name of Martin Niemoller. Do any of you remember him? Raise a hand if you're familiar with the name of Pastor Niemoller. He was a German pastor who spoke out courageously and opposed Hitler during the thirties and nineteen forties. I remember a story he shared with many of us upstate after the war...this was 1946. As I recall it, it went this way...

In 1934 Adolf Hitler summoned many of the leaders of the German Church to his Berlin office to berate them for their lukewarm support of his programs. Pastor Martin Niemoller explained that he was concerned only for the welfare of the Church and of the German people. Hitler snapped at him,

"You confine yourself to the Church and I'll take care of the German people".

Niemoller replied,

"You said, 'I will take care of the German people', but we, too, as Christians and as churchmen, have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone in this world has the power to take it from us."

That was 1934 and they say that Hitler listened in silence, but that very evening his Gestapo raided Niemoller's rectory and a few days later a bomb exploded in his church. During the months and years that followed, Niemoller was closely watched by the secret police and in June of 1937, he preached these words to his church:

"We have no more thought of using our own powers to escape the arm of the authorities than had the Apostles of old. We must obey God rather than man."

And soon after, Martin Niemoller was arrested and placed in solitary confinement. In February of 1938...February 7th....Dr. Niemoller went on trial. He said that that morning a green-uniformed guard escorted this courageous pastor from his prison cell and through a series of underground passages toward the courtroom. Niemoller said that he was overcome with terror and with loneliness. He wondered: what would become of him? What would happen to his wife and his children. His church? What tortures awaited them all? The guard's face was impassive and he was as silent as stone. But, as they exited a tunnel to go up a flight of stairs, Niemoller said that he heard a whisper. At first he didn't know where it was coming from, for the voice was soft as a sigh. Then he realized that this officer was breathing into his ear the word of Proverbs 18, verse 10....where it reads:

"The Lord is a MIGHTY TOWER where His people can run for safety....."

Niemoller's fear fell away and the power of that verse sustained him through his trial and in the years that followed ...years for him spent in a Nazi concentration camp. "The Lord is a MIGHTY TOWER!" Perhaps there is someone hear this morning who is lonely and feeling terror in his or her life who needs to hear someone whisper that word...."The Lord is a mighty tower." We are not alone.

CLOSING Quickly and briefly here at the end, let's review those four ways in which Christ gives us that peace that "passes all of our human understanding...." The peace of a clear conscience. The peace of forgiveness. The peace of quiet acceptance. And the peace of God's very presence in moments of loneliness, fear and even terror. Said Jesus,

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PRAYER

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PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where tension and fear, anxiety and restlessness can be found. Let your peace touch and motivate us... and send us forth from here with courage and confidence in our lives. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.