



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Calvary Episcopal Church  
Easter Six, May 26, 2019

In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I searched my cute story file high and low in hopes of recalling some sweet or self-deprecating or funny story—preferably all three—with which to open my sermon this morning, but I came up empty. The gospel passage presented us today is a part of John's narrative, which is known as Jesus' Final Discourse, a sort of summary of all things important. Rendered, as John recalls it, the setting for the discourse was tense and filled with prescient sadness. For even the most emotionally blunted of Jesus' inner circle, it was now abundantly clear that the days ahead would not be easy, that everything they had held to be true and hopeful about Jesus was about to be tested. The way they had imagined the kingdom of God coming on earth would be upended by violence and despair. Jesus' words are notably tender, anticipating his followers' need for comfort in the coming days; and in our understanding of the largeness of scripture, we also hear them as words of comfort for us in the coming millennia, words that would bring comfort to us as we attempt to follow Jesus, no matter how tentatively or ineffectively. In permanently memorialized words he spoke to them in the caring tone we might use with our own children, "Do not let your hearts be heavy, don't be afraid."

This year this lesson falls, as it frequently does, on Memorial Day weekend, a day, which used to be called "Decoration Day." It was/is a day when the graves of fallen members of our armed forces, who never grew old, are decorated with flags, wreaths, or flowers. Though it kicks off summer, a time purported to be less serious than other seasons, there is about this weekend a well-earned solemnity, despite being served up with a good-sized dose of jingoism. Pacifists and hawks alike mourn the loss of lives, most often young lives, of those willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for what they perceived to be the worthiest of causes. So in the midst of enjoying of our backyard burgers and waving flags, there is within this largely secular holiday a kind of civic religiosity that invites more thought and is for us, I think, helped by the happenstance of its falling on the weekend when we consider some of Jesus' last words.

Religion and state never go together, except when they do—which is all the time. The demarcation line between spiritual and secular, though widely touted, is largely theoretical. Every moment we are spiritual beings, whose task it is to live the tenants of our faith lovingly and passionately without the burden of sectarianism, without insisting that all believe or practice just as we do. But make no mistake about it: our spirituality calls us to live in a particular way politically, socially, and spiritually—a life that is committed to moral values that supersede the particulars of one faith, even ours. So very briefly, here are three take away points that Jesus spoke to his tattered, little band of followers near the end of his life. Two thousand years later, these emphatic words resonate for us not only as Christians but also as citizens.

The first thing he says is a slight variation of what he has said so many times before about loving God. This time, he operationalizes the commandment: he tells them, and thereby tells us, what loving God looks like. "Those who love me will keep my word." Lest we forget, here is a sampling of his words—all top hits among folks like us but really hard to follow: "Turn the other cheek; love your enemy; seek God and others before self; take up your cross and follow me; to find your life, you have

to lose it; let the one with no sin cast the first stone.” You get it; I get it; we all get it; but getting is not the issue. Living it is—and it is never a *fait accompli* but the work of a lifetime.

The second thing he leaves for them is extraordinary. In the vein of offering comfort, he says that God will send an Advocate, *paraclete*, the Holy Spirit. Now, it’s pretty clear in scripture that this was less the arrival of the Holy Spirit (the second verse in the Bible refers to the Spirit of God hovering over the waters) than a statement of the power of this spirit in the world. Jesus makes an outrageous claim, “Listen to the Holy Spirit, which will tell you everything—not just a bunch of stuff but **everything**.” I know how ridiculous that sounds, but I believe it. I truly do. If we listen, the Holy Spirit will tell us everything. I don’t always listen; but in my heart of hearts, I *know* that if I do, the Spirit will tell me what I need to know (what I **really** need to know). This is what the essence of God is for me. Much more than some amorphous, mysterious, or ethereal entity, the Holy Spirit gets into the nitty-gritty of our lives.

It is the still quiet voice that pulls us toward love and goodness; it tells us not to be jerks. It countermands, for example, such unquestioned (and beloved) truisms as: “business is business” and “if you don’t look out for yourself, nobody else will.” Those premises may work for this world, but they are not the standard for living in a world in which the Holy Spirit reigns. The Holy Spirit tells us that success strewn with the carnage of unbridled ambition is an empty victory.

It tells us that while dealing with borders and immigration is complicated, rules of common decency and goodness and generosity still beckon our better angels. That’s a Lincolnesque way of saying, “Jesus wants us to be kind to strangers and immigrants.” Nobody really has to be convinced that putting people in cages is wrong. How we work that out is about politics; knowing it is true is about the Holy Spirit.

It will tell us what we *need* to know about surviving episodes of loss and separation that seem unbearable; the Holy Spirit bears the tiniest beam of light in the darkest of nights, enough to remind us that the weeping of darkness will someday give rise to the joy of morning. When our longings and prayers are too deep, too expansive, or too sorrowful for words, the Holy Spirit will give them voice for us.

And, finally, Jesus promised this group of cherished friends, whom he was about to leave, that he would leave them his peace. As they sat with him that night, I have to wonder if the disciples may have thought they might rather pass on his brand of peace, seeing as how peace Jesus-style, had landed him (and them as it turned out) in a heap of trouble. But the truth is that’s the kind of peace, which Jesus brokered—the kind, which passes all understanding.

I start every day using a little App called Headspace. It’s sort of meditation for dummies, a tool to help me find peace. Nothing wrong with it, in fact, there is a lot good about it—good for mental health, perspective. That kind of peace is certainly not the antithesis of what Jesus offered, but it is also far from the whole story. For Jesus, peace did not mean the absence of struggle but the presence of love. Love stirs things up in a hurry; it rarely opts to simply observe or to be neutral. In fact, objectivity is greatly overrated. We are not called to be objective. Jesus took sides, taking the side of peace even when it created all sorts of opposition for every direction. A beloved son of the south, Walker Alexander Percy, said it best:

*The peace of God, it is no peace,  
But strife closed in the sod,  
Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing—  
The marvelous peace of God.*

Important last words – all of these are. Love as Jesus did; listen to the Holy Spirit, to help us; and seek a complicated peace that passes our understanding. If we hear them, if we really hear these words and take them into our hearts, the world can still be a different place.

In the name of God: AMEN.