SERMON ON JOHN 14: 23-29

MAY 22, 2022

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BLUE HILL

This world is a mess. Putin is vying with Hitler and with Attila the Hun for the title of history’s most unethical and viciously cruel world leader ever. Our American politicians are so busy posturing and clawing at one another that they don’t seem to have time to work together for the benefit of the people whom they serve. They can’t even decide who should be allowed to vote and how they should be allowed to do it. We have a higher rate of anxiety disorders and depression than ever before recorded in this country. We have a mass shooting at least once a week whether we need it or not. There is no concurrence on whether or not climate change is real. And potholes!!! Here in Maine we have potholes large enough to swallow entire cars.

Let’s see… Have I forgotten anything? Oh yes! There’s a pandemic going on that is driving us all completely cookoo. The people of the United States can’t even agree on whether or not we have an obligation to protect one another by vaccinating, masking, and socially distancing. One minute we think it’s safe to get together with family and friends and the next, we find ourselves in the middle of yet another spike in CoVid numbers! To quote many who’ve come before me, “What’s this world coming to?”

Yet Jesus says “Peace be with you. My peace I leave with you” What?! Peace?! You’ve got to be kidding! These are words spoken by a man who is to be killed the next day. How can he be speaking of peace?! How can he have peace to offer his disciples, and by extension, to us, when he is surrounded by people who are out to get him, even one of his own disciples?

There’s no peace in this crazy, chaotic, fractured and fractious world of ours . . . is there? Certainly we haven’t given up hope of finding peace; we continue looking. We look in the yoga studios that are on every block. We search for peace in the offices of therapists of every persuasion. We expect our relationships to give us peace. It’s YOUR responsibility to make ME happy. If your first relationship doesn’t help you to find peace then discard that one and try another, and another, and another. Alcohol sales are off the wall. If that doesn’t work, how about a shopping spree? And if that doesn’t give you peace there are always pills. Oh boy, are there ever pills . . . little pink ones, big blue ones, and white ones of all sizes and shapes. And those are just the ones that are legal.

Out of curiosity, I googled “How do I find inner peace?” I found a plethora of self help gurus offering their best advice. Some of it was pretty ok. There were recommendations such as: “Stop wanting things that you can’t have.” OK, that’s reasonably good advice, as long as you can force yourself to stop wanting. And “You can’t fix what’s past, so stop trying and move on.” Hmmmnn. Well, maybe, sort of, as long as your past isn’t laden with unresolved issues. And “Stop trying to please others. You can’t make them happy anyway. Just take care of yourself.” Um… well, I’m more of my brother’s keeper kind of person, so that seemed a little narcissistic to me. And then there was my personal favorite, “Buy my book. The answers are in there. It’s only $39.99 plus shipping and handling.” Yeah, right.

Well, if google’s gurus can’t provide a sure fire formula to find inner peace, how about Jeff Bezos? Thanks to the pandemic, I am discovering that Amazon seems to have everything that anybody could ever possibly want. So, I went to Amazon and into the search blank I typed “INNER PEACE”. Here’s a sampling of what Amazon had to offer: the “Hippie Ombre Inner Peace Bathmat”; a deck of inner peace flashcards; “The Dream Time Inner Peace Eye Pillow” in a lavender satin pillow case for $15.99; an inner peace coloring book; the “Angelite Crystal Healing Necklace” that activates throat chakra for $14.99; the “Lotuswei Inner Peace Flower Essence Anointing Oil” for a mere $40.00 for a little 5cc bottle with an eye dropper; the “Chakra Solfeggio Energy Tuning Fork Anxiety Relief Sound Kit”; the “Inner Peace Perpetual Calendar”; and a myriad of books from dozens more of the self-help gurus.

Meditation, mindfulness, aroma therapy, massage, flower essence anointing oil---all of these are pleasant and all are ways to provide a quick, albeit temporary dose of peace, or at least something that passes for peace, or at the very least, a momentary absence of chaos and excruciating agita. But perhaps these are best used as adjuncts or supplements to something deeper and more lasting.

God, on the other hand, offers us that something better, more lasting than all of the above. He offers us “THE PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING” or, in some Bible translations, “THE PEACE THAT TRANSCENDS ALL UNDERSTANDING”. OK. If it transcends all understanding, and we therefore can’t fully understand it, at least give us a hint. Just what is it?

The Greek word that in this passage is translated “peace”, and which corresponds to the more familiar Hebrew word “Shalom” is “Eirene” and is defined as “oneness, peace, quietness, or rest”. It is not the absence of a militaristic war. Rather it is a state of mind, a relaxed state of being in which there is no anxiety, because we are absolutely assured that all of our concerns are taken care of by the God who knows all and who loves us passionately. And it is present no matter what awful circumstances may be trying to engulf us and drag us down.

So where can we get some of this peace? Can I buy some? I haven’t seen it on the shelves at Tradewinds or the Co-op. Could I make it at home with ingredients that I have in my own kitchen? Is there a recipe?

Of course there is no magic bullet. We can surmise from scripture that the people of Biblical times must have had an inordinate amount of anxiety and depression, perhaps even as much as in our times today. We can infer that, because the Bible is riddled with help for dealing with troubles, troubles of the heart, troubles of the mind, troubles of the spirit, troubles of our very existence.

So, once again, I ask, how do we get it? Where do we go to find that peace that transcends all understanding, that is incomprehensibly powerful.

First of all, let’s look in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. We have the Psalms. The Psalms are an amazing collection of expressions of human emotion, largely David’s but some of Solomon’s and a few from other psalmists. In fact, there is very little in the range of human emotions that cannot be found elegantly expressed in one psalm or another. David, Solomon and the other psalmists experienced both positive and negative emotions of every sort and wrote songs to vent those emotions. Those songs are the psalms. There is fear. There is frustration. There is compassion. There is loneliness. There is anger. There is love. There is confusion. There is awe. There is grief. There is gratitude. The list goes on and on, and there are multiple variations on each of these themes.

Isn’t it comforting to know that our God fully understands what we feel, no matter what it is that we are feeling? And isn’t it helpful to realize that two of the greatest human beings who ever lived, the remarkable King David and the wise Solomon both had feet of clay? They, like we, did NOT feel cheerful, upbeat, ebullient every moment of every day. They had times when they felt all sorts of unpleasant emotions, but they knew what to do with those unpleasant thoughts and feelings. They verbalized them as articulately as they were able, and they took them to God. They took them in all of their raw, pathos and anguish, and gave them to the best listener in the universe, the one being who could understand every nuance of every emotion that they were experiencing and the one being who could effect change in those factors that were plaguing them.

When we, today are troubled, it may at times be difficult to identify exactly what negative emotion or thought process might be affecting us, or we might know WHAT it is that we are feeling but not have the right WORDS at hand to EXPRESS what we’re feeling. When that happens try turning to psalms.

The 150 psalms are a treasure trove of prayer songs that we can use to share both our misery and our joy with God. There are psalms for those who are in pain, for those who are struggling with ethical issues, for those who feel defeated by life’s vicissitudes, for those who are fighting addictive habits, for those who have problematic relationships. There are psalms for virtually every circumstance that we as humans could experience. The psalms can not only help us to find ways to express our pain but can also help us to find peace in these circumstances. Lisa’s wonderful sermon a couple of weeks ago was based on the beloved 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” This psalm has brought peace and comfort to literally millions of people who were experiencing physical, emotional, or spiritual pain.

What else is there besides Psalms? The New Testament is rife with many of what I sometimes call “God’s one-liners”, not to be flippant, but because sometimes those one-liners, oft quoted though they may be, and as formulaic as they might seem, may be exactly what we need. They may be what we need to ponder in order to emerge from what John Bunyan’, in his Christian classic, “Pilgrim’s Progress”, called “the slough of despond”.

The concept of the “slough of despond” is certainly not a state to which we all aspire, but Bunyan’s description of that state captures it well. This slough is one which grabs your feet and sucks you down, like quicksand. No matter how hard you try, it can be SOOOoo difficult to pull out of it.

Here is one of those one-liners or in this case, actually three sentences that can be wonderfully helpful. Paul writes to the Phillipians: “And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your minds on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”

 Despite the state of the world today, there is no shortage of these GOOD things about which to think. Just for a moment, think of a person you have known who is able to put a smile on your face whenever you bring him or her to mind. Think of a day with perfect weather, brightly sunny, with spring flowers blossoming all around you and a gentle breeze wafting through the trees. Think of a grandchild, or any small child you know, who, when you simply see him or her playing can bring out your own inner child. Think of something that makes you laugh. Think of a piece of artwork, or a photograph, or a poem so poignant and beautiful that it brings tears to your eyes. Think of a leader or teacher who has inspired you to be your very best self. Think about this congregation of caring souls who know how to have fun together, who’ve taken the lemons of this wretched pandemic, and made lemonade out of them, and who have managed to care for one another in the best of times and the worst of times. Think of people who have made an impact on our world, an impact for good. Think of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, the Dalai Llama, Martin Luther King, little Greta Thunberg, Desmond Tutu, and even some of our local luminaries, Rob McCall, Elliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch.

Thinking about these things that are good doesn’t mean that we should not be concerned for the ills of our world and do everything in our power to fix what we can. But it does mean that God has given us so much for which to be grateful, and to use to maintain that core of inner peace, that we should not let the evil, painful, and depressing things consume our focus.

In Matthew chapter 6, the same chapter in which we find Jesus teaching us to pray the Lord’s prayer, we also find a valuable “one-liner” encased in Jesus’ teachings on how and why we shouldn’t worry. He tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink, about our bodies, what we wear. He adds, “Can any one of you, by worrying add one hour to your life?” The answer, of course, is no, and in fact, modern medicine tells us clearly that if anything, worrying has a distinctly negative effect on our health and can even shorten our lives.

Jesus goes on to tell us that we are to first seek his kingdom and his righteousness, and that God will be the one to take care of our food, our drink, our clothing, and our bodies. “Do not worry about tomorrow,” he says, “for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

The bottom line is that we are enjoined to focus on our relationship with God and on our own spiritual growth, instead of letting ourselves get into a dither about those things that have no eternal significance. That may sound ridiculously simplistic, and more than just a little bit challenging. It requires that we give more than mere lip service to the idea of absolutely trusting God. If we can truly believe that God is in control and wants the best for us, we are then relieved of the responsibility of worrying about those things. They recede into the level of trivial.

Another of those “one liners”, familiar to many of us, and that we can cling to when things seem the most bleak is from Paul’s letter to the Romans “All things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose.” This doesn’t mean that everything that’s going to happen to us is good simply because we love God. Quite the contrary. Much of what occurs in the world and in our own lives will still be decidedly bad. But even those horribly stressful things that may afflict us as individuals and that may occur in our world can work together for us so that the end result is positive.

 I’m sure that if we stop and think about it, all of us can recall experiences in which we weathered a difficult time in our lives only to find that, as a result, we matured, or grew closer to loved ones, or learned a valuable life lesson that made the difficulty of the experience worth it in the end. And yes, it may sometimes take quite a long while before we are able to look at the experience through God’s eyes and gain the prospective that allows us to appreciate the good therein, but whether in the short term or the long term, God will ultimately show us how the difficulties and tribulations have worked in combination for our best and, most importantly, for the best in our relationship with God.

The peace of the world and the peace of God are two very different things. Worldly peace is entirely dependent on circumstances, absence of war, economic stability, physical comfort, absence of the triggers of anger and frustration. The peace of God is internal to us as individuals. It is a deep spiritual serenity that exists even when chaos completely surrounds us. It’s not dependent on believing IN God. Instead, it’s dependent on BELIEVING God, believing all that He has promised us, believing that the hairs on our heads are numbered and that, if we allow it, God will be in control of everything that affects us. We need not worry about anything, because nothing will happen to us without God allowing it.

Yes, this certainly does seem simplistic, and requires a childlike faith to accept. But if we are able to accept it, we have nothing to worry about, nothing that can generate anxiety, nothing that can cause that great existential angst. God has a reason for everything that she allows us to experience and will, in the long run, take care of it, whatever it is.

Each of us has the opportunity to accept the peace that passes all understanding. But we also have the option to decline it. Jesus tells us “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” He doesn’t come to our doors ready to bash them in with one of those long heavy things that the police use, or to shoot the doors open with a semi-automatic. Jesus is gracious and knocks on our doors. If we choose to let Him in, he brings us many things that are wonderful. One of those is that peace that transcends all understanding. It may not make any sense, from a worldly perspective. We may not always realize that it is there, especially if we are in the midst of one of those times that finds us wallowing in the slough of despond.

But instead of looking down at the muck that is threatening to suck us up and swallow us whole, we need to look up. We need to think on those things that are good. We need to focus on growing spiritually rather than worrying about our future. We need to remember that all things are working together for good for us. We need to communicate with God and pray those psalms that find us right precisely where we are. We need to open our eyes and minds and hearts to God’s peace. As Jesus said to the disciples and as He says to us, “My peace I leave with you.” And that’s a promise. Come and get it.

 AMEN