



**“Peace I Leave with You”**  
**Scripture – John 14:23-29**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, May 1, 2016**

At first glance, this morning’s lectionary reading seems completely out of place. We are more than a month past Easter and nearing Pentecost, yet today’s reading slings us back to the Last Supper.

In your mind, can you picture the scene? Jesus and his disciples have gathered in a private room for a meal. I suspect there is friendly banter and laughter because these men have formed tight bonds during their adventures together. Peter is the butt of a joke about being hardheaded. Thomas is taking a ribbing for always being so skeptical. But, as they are savoring the morsels of food and relishing glasses of wine, Jesus feels a suffocating darkness rolling over him. He finally shatters the festive atmosphere, blurting out words that send a chill through the room: soon – very soon – he will be snatched away from them.

The disciples’ anxiety erupts. How can they survive without him? Jesus has completely reshaped their lives. He has filled them with joy, he has given them a purpose, and he has bolstered their expectations. All of that will vanish if he leaves them. “No!” the disciples protest. They cannot bear the thought of being without him.

Do you know the fear and anxiety that can accompany the loss of a loved one? Do you know the distress that hits with a dreaded diagnosis? Or, the sleepless nights triggered by financial insecurity? Or, the helpless feeling of watching your child on a downward spiral? Or, the anguish that comes with break-up of a marriage?

To his followers then and now, Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” To which many of us reply, “Jesus, you must be joking. We do not choose anxiety and if we could simply flip off the switch on our fears, we would do it in a heartbeat.”

When Jesus announced to his disciples that this would be his final meal with them, he could see their eyes grow wide with panic. He knew that his death would traumatize them and they would face a crisis of faith. He was saying everything he could to reassure them that they could survive this blow because they would not be alone. Jesus said, “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Jesus promised that they would have God’s Spirit with them always.

Our passage is merely a snippet of a long farewell speech Jesus delivers during their final meal together. He tells them they will have God’s Spirit with them, but he does not imply that this is a protective shield that

will guard them from harm. He even warns them that their connection to him may lead to their own persecution. Thus, when Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” he is not promising that nothing terrible will befall them. Instead, he is telling them something that sounds counterintuitive – that they can experience peace, despite trials. They can experience peace despite the daunting future they face.

The peace we experience when God’s Spirit fills us is not free of turmoil. God’s peace does not produce an idyllic state of immunity from troubles. We wish it did, but we live in an imperfect world. There are hostile forces and we are fragile creatures. Because there is freedom, God does not wipe away poor decisions we make or the bad decisions of others that take a toll on us. No one is exempt from accidents, illness and death. It seems more likely that anxiety is inevitable and peace is elusive.

One thing that can help us from feeling guilty that our faith is not strong enough is to keep in mind that the disciples did not march out of that upper room courageous and anxiety-free. The words did not take root in them instantly. When Jesus was tortured and executed, they ran. The author of John points out that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors, terrified that the authorities would come for them next.

Then, how do we understand this peace Jesus gives? It is an inward calm despite outward storms. It is not entirely worry free, but it is a feeling of confidence that we are in harmony with God and God will see us through whatever comes. The peace Jesus gives is faith – not faith in terms of believing certain tenets, but faith in terms of trust – trusting God is with us and trusting God’s guidance.

A colleague describes one of her favorite catalogues – VivaTerra. It “sells items made from recycled materials. They offer bookshelves made from old railroad ties. They have bright doormats created from the left over material from making rubber flip-flops. They sell colorful oriental rugs made from recycled plastic bottles. You can buy an aluminum wastebasket made from cans that came out with imperfect company logos and were tossed on the trash heap. This is what God is in the business of doing – reclaiming tattered pieces of life, and transforming them into something new – something we never would have imagined.”<sup>1</sup>

I have known people whose lives came crashing down when they lost their job, but in time, they landed in another field that gave them more satisfaction than ever before. I have known people who were devastated after the person they loved died unexpectedly, but over time, they were able to laugh and enjoy life again.

When you fear what is coming, faith is trusting that God will infuse you with courage. When you feel too devastated to continue living, faith is trusting that God will strengthen your resolve to carry on. When sadness fills your soul, faith is trusting that God will help you feel joy once again. When you feel total despair about the future, faith is trusting that God will open doors you never imagined. Trusting God does not vanquish the hardships of life, but it prevents the suffering from defining us or destroying us.

A colleague shares something she once read: “‘The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.’ Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, because we know that mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there is another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, ‘This is crazy! I’m heading home.’”

The life of faith can be like that – doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of trusting God seems far-fetched. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them God’s Spirit would be with them, and in the verses that follow our passage, Jesus says they are tied together like branches on the

vine-or like climbers tied to the rope- tied together by God's Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith and to encourage us when trusting seems absurd."<sup>2</sup>

Bitter winds can blow our way, but we can face them with courage and determination because we are not alone. In the community of faith, we have the support of our fellow climbers and the unwavering presence of God. We may be like the anxious disciples in the upper room or the frightened disciples behind locked doors, but we can also be like the bold disciples who stand next to the empty tomb.

## NOTES

1. Christiane M. Lang, "Loose Ends, Lost Sons," August 9, 2009.
2. Barbara K. Lundblad, "I Will Not Leave You Orphaned," May 01, 2005.