

**THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
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UCC**

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“Advent in July: Peace”
Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

John 14:25-27

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate,^[1] 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. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid.

SERMON

Will you pray with me?

God, may you add a blessing to these words I speak, and the meditations of all our hearts and minds this day. For we seek to be your people of peace, this day and always. Amen.

There they were, all gathered around.

They didn't know he was dying yet. But they were beginning to realize that might be where this was headed.

The protest march into Jerusalem when tensions were already high.

The vandalization of the Temple.

They knew something was coming.

How could it not?

He had time to flee, of course.

Many of them assumed that's what he would do – they would do.

Just lay low until things cooled off, then start again.

But no. That night he gathered them around the table, like a dying man is surrounded by his family.

What he told them would be his will, of sorts. His last testament for them.

Leave, as Jesus says it, means bequest.

To you, Peter, I bequest the knowledge that you will deny knowing me, and that is okay.

To you, Thomas, I bequest the assurance that you carry the way inside you, that you need not be afraid.

Don't worry about remembering all this, the advocate is coming.

And I wonder if he looked around that circle, then, and when his eyes rested on John, if they welled up a bit, and he said,

To you, John Lewis, son of sharecroppers, I bequest my peace.

I sometimes wonder if Rep. Lewis, Rev. Vivian, and the others knew that morning, how important that walk was, or if it was only in hindsight.

If they pulled at their collars.

Straightened their shirts.

Cleared their throats before marching.

Of course, it was only one morning in a lifetime of work, but I still wonder if they thought of Jesus, before his protest march into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

I wonder whether Rep. Lewis' non-violence ever wavered, thinking of Jesus vandalizing the Temple. Pulling together some rope that was on hand to make a whip and causing a scene. Destroying the merchandise that was on the tables. Provoking a confrontation with the authorities.

Did he ever want to cause a scene that way? As the baton cracked his skull?

When the officers were picking him up by his feet and dragging him away?

Again. And again. And again.

Or did they close their eyes, sit at Jesus' feet, and hear the words again?

My peace I give to you.

Friends, think about your definition of peace. My guess is that it rests somewhere between one of two ideals: an individualized, spiritual state, or an idealized, even utopian, communal ideal.

And this is the trouble, isn't it? The one is removed from whatever is happening in the world around us, and the other can't escape it. The one is attainable, but morally suspect, and the other is unattainable, but morally beyond reproach.

And both feel a bit hollow, no?

This is precisely because peace – at least as Jesus intends it, is generated precisely in the relationship between the two.

Peace, as Jesus intends it, is made in the relationship between the individual spirit and the whole.

Peace, *iraynay* in the Greek, properly means wholeness. When all essential parts come together. The joining together of all that is fractured and disparate and broken.

Friends, humanity has an extraordinary capacity to be broken. Some traumas are random, some are the result of centuries of systemic violence. Some affect us until the day we die.

Think about that. *Until the day we die*, when we are *finally told *rest in peace*. Rest in wholeness.

But when Jesus looks out at his gathered disciples, when he looks you in the eye and doesn't look away, what he is saying is I am bequeathing you this wholeness *now*. *Rest in this wholeness now*.

Peace is the **project* of wholeness. Individually, this means Jesus' bequest helps us understand ourselves to be fully, deeply, unconditionally loved, especially when and where we are vulnerable and fractured.

Not in spite of those traumas, not by ignoring them or papering over them, but by recognizing that those traumas – so many of which are the result of our openness and vulnerability to love – those traumas are precisely where the cross, Jesus, the Spirit is leading us. Because they will become our greatest strength, our greatest healing. As Jesus' was.

Collectively, it means those voices of trauma must be the center of our human project, because they reveal precisely where our communal wholeness is incomplete.

Indeed, what else does vulnerability and trauma do other than make us profoundly aware of our relationship to the whole? When you are vulnerable, fractured, you know that you are one amongst many, because you have been hurt by something outside yourself.

This is why it is so much easier to experience peace when on the mountaintop, or on the water. Because it reminds us of our place in creation. Beautiful and integral, but also one amongst many. Small in comparison to the mountains above, or the waters below. Smaller still, then, our woundings, and greater our peace in having survived them, because it reaffirms our place as one in creation.

This means that my understanding of my own wholeness should carry with it a corresponding responsibility for your wholeness. As part of the larger whole, I am not complete until the whole is complete. Inner peace that fails to empathize with the traumas of others is no peace at all, for it has failed to realize its relationship with others, and therefore rests upon an inflated understanding of one's place in creation.

This is what is meant by the popular protest slogan, no justice, no peace. It means simply that, unless wholeness is possible for every one of us, there simply is no wholeness for us all together.

On some deep, instinctive level, we all know this. But everything is screaming at us we shouldn't believe it.

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Tom Postmes, Professor of Social Psychology, is fond of asking his students this question: "Imagine an airplane makes an emergency landing and breaks into three parts. As the cabin fills with smoke, everybody inside realizes: We've got to get out of here. What happens?"

On Planet A, the passengers turn to their neighbors to ask if they're okay. Those needing assistance are helped out of the plane first. People are willing to give their lives, even for perfect strangers.

On planet B, everyone's left to fend for themselves. Panic breaks out. There's lots of pushing and shoving. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities get trampled underfoot.

Now the question: Which planet do we live on?"ⁱ

Which planet do we live on?

Well, friends?

Take a moment and look around.

Think carefully.

Which planet do we live on?

Postmes estimates that 97% of people he asks – educated or not, first responders, students or professionals – we all will answer B.

We feel as if are living on the planet where everyone is left to fend for themselves. When catastrophe strikes, chaos reigns.

In truth, however, the opposite is true. Over 700 field studies have shown that "in crisis, murder, burglary, rape, crime in general, usually drops." There is never mayhem. As historian Rutger Bregman quotes in his new book, *Human Kind: A Hopeful History*, "whatever the extent of the looting, it always pales in significance to the wide-spread altruism." [From bombs dropping, levees breaking, the twin towers falling, and yes, even the Titanic sinking,] "when crisis hits ... we become our best selves." He concludes that he knows "of no other sociological finding that is backed by so much solid evidence that's so blithely ignored."ⁱⁱ

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Recently, I had a conversation with a friend who was terrified by the recent order made by her state's governor, requiring all schools offer in-person education this fall.

She's trying to kill us. She said, clearly in a panic.

She's not trying to kill you, I replied. *Why would she be trying to kill you?*

Because she's a toady who will do whatever Trump says.

And that makes her want to kill you? That wouldn't be very good for her numbers.

On the same day, media came out from my hometown's city council meeting. My longtime dentist, father of a woman the grade above me, mild-mannered and balding, was caught on tape saying, "All those Black Lives Matter folks are just criminals."

It wasn't said in a moment of panic, but you could sense it, underneath.
The fear. This idea that there is someone out there to get him.

Friends, peace of both kinds is closer than it ever has been in my lifetime.
Precisely because all of the unrest we are experiencing.
Precisely because we are becoming aware of the fractures in our social fabric.

But this recognition is profoundly dependent upon the stories we tell ourselves about humankind. About one another. About our capacity for change.

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Whatever you think about his political positions in the House of Representatives, when John Lewis stood on the Edmund Pettus bridge that Sunday morning 55 years ago, what he carried with him was peace.

The kind of peace that no baton, no beating, could take away.
The kind of peace that allowed him to be unafraid. To be courageous.
The kind of peace that afforded him the sense of his worthiness before God, and therefore before all people.
Which meant it was the kind of peace that allowed him to believe in the capacity of others to change, to become more whole.

And change we have.
More slowly than he might have liked.
Certainly more slowly than I would have liked.

But just last month he gave an interview saying that this time feels different.
““This feels and looks so different,” he said. “It is so much more massive and all inclusive.”
He added, “There will be no turning back.”

Brothers and sisters, when we started this sermon series last week, on Advent in July, the point was for us to find ways to celebrate what the incarnation – God in human flesh – bestows on us in times that are hard.

Sitting at Jesus' feet, there is no doubt that we have received peace.
The knowledge that we are loved – just as we are.
Incomplete as we are.
Vulnerable as we are.
In the eyes of God, we are made whole.

If God loves the executed criminal from Nazareth, surely God loves you.
In the beauty of that knowledge, and these green mountains, you can rest.

And that's fine.

But my hope is that this will inspire you.

The knowledge that this wholeness has passed down throughout the generations, one after another after another, until it reaches you, just as surely as it reached Thomas and Peter and John Lewis, well, I hope that inspires you to remember that collectively we are made for wholeness, too.

In short, my prayer is certainly that you might be at peace and be transformed by it. But more than that, that you believe others can be transformed, too.

For if you do, peace becomes not some utopian ideal, but the reality for which we are all created.

May it be so.

ⁱ Tom Postmes, as quoted in "Human Kind: A hopeful history" Pp 2-3

ⁱⁱ Bregman, Rutger, *Human Kind: A Hopeful History*, 3