

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Peace Be With You”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 26, 2019

**Acts 16:9-15**

*During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.*

*We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.*

**John 14:23-29**

*Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.*

*‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But 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. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith are open to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that your spirit would take whatever it is within us, as well as the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words we've read from Scripture, and the words you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. That in all of these words, we become the living Word of Jesus Christ for each of us as individuals, as a community of faith, and as people who are loved by you. Let your Word dwell within us, comfort us, guide us, challenge us, and forever be on our lips and be our actions. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

“Peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid.” These words are the classic go-to for a memorial service. Anytime that I sit down and plan a service where we're going to give thanks to God for someone's life, almost with this magnetic draw, John 14, it's just pulling at you, "Pay attention to me. Read me. Talk about me." And we know why. Because it's beautiful; it's comforting, the kind of peace that surpasses understanding. The kind of comfort and blessing that only God knows how to give to us. A word of reassurance that when our hearts are quaking like Jell-O, we hear that, "It's okay. Don't let them be troubled. You don't need to be afraid." You almost hear that echo, "I'm with you. I will walk with you. I will provide for you. My rod and my staff, they will comfort you." And I've got to be honest. In the last several weeks in the life of the church, I came to this text again this week. It just felt like one more memorial service. Preparing for one a couple of weeks ago, one yesterday, then today, it's like, "What do I do with this text that is so beloved and so rich, and is often set like a perfect diamond in this setting of memorial celebration? How do I lift it out of that setting and place it somewhere else? Will it even fit, or does it belong? Will its beauty somehow be diminished if we think about this passage differently?" And, as I was preparing for this week, for Sunday, I don't know where this came from. But the image that struck me as I was sort of wondering, "Where do I put this passage? What kind of context do we put it in during this season of kind of wrapping up the church program year and transitioning to summer instead of just memorial like, "How do I set this image that came to me as a remembrance that I had as a young child pulling up to my grandmother's house. I remember

pulling off the street, onto the gravel driveway, and the car kind of rolled past the house towards the garage, and my dad always parked further back than most, and as we were pulling into that spot where I knew he would stop the car, I look out and there's my grandmother at the clothesline. She was probably all of about four foot tall, maybe 70-- 27 pounds, she was skinny, slight, and she's got the rug from the living room draped over the clothesline, and she's got a tennis racket, and she's just whacking that rug and the rug was shaking and shaking and dust was flying, and I'm like, "What is she doing?" and my dad is like, "Oh, it's okay, she's just cleaning the rug." and I'm like, "You clean a rug by beating it up? What?" But that was her style, and apparently, it worked.

As that image came to me, I realized, "Oh, that's kind of how I feel, like that rug, just kind of whack whack whack. Because life is tough especially in this sort of season of our life together, where there is a lot of loss, sprinkled in with tons of joy, but it's just, there's so much going on. And so, what I imagined was taking the passage and lifting it out of that context. And rather than having the sense of having life beat us up, or tenderizing us like, "Okay. What do we do with this?" And as I often do, I read the newspapers, or while I read the online version of newspapers, an image caught my attention. I don't know if you've heard this, but it's in the news that there's a lot of people who have paid a lot of money to climb Mount Everest, and they've had an unexpected number of accidents and deaths this year. And the articles that I read, were all talking about how the volume of people trying to get up to Mount Everest is making it difficult for anyone who's has a bit of a stumble or a fall or is just tired, it's like they get out of the flow and they're in deep trouble.

I also ran across a picture that someone took. I don't know how far it is, but it shows the trail right at the top of the crest, all the way from-- obviously the place where the person took it, but you see a line of color go all the way up and wrap around towards the top of the mountain. And there must have been hundreds of people in that line. It's like one right after the other and there's no room right or left. They're all marching forward, and up. And I thought, "Man, in today's world where we've got all of these forces pushing us: political, economic, family stress, health situations, even people who love climbing and want to go climb Mount Everest, it's like, they can't-- there's no room. They just got to get in line and do one step just like the person in front of them and away they go and then back down, and any slip and there's a problem. And again, it seems like we're towards that way, "Is this passage going to be about comfort in the midst of tragedy?" But what came to me was, and this is the surreal part of it, in this image of people kind of lined up and knowing that if any one of them sat down or moved out of line, they'd be in trouble. The image came to me of a spot where they could sit on the mountain and be okay. And it was almost like there was a couch and these arms kind of wrapping around the couch, keeping the person warm and providing them with things to eat and drink. And I thought, "That's really kind of what this passage is about." It's about a deeper sense of peace than the world even knows how to give. It's about a deeper sense of assurance than any of us have really tasted or touched. And the thing that's important to me is that this peace-- as it says in the passage, this peace is given to you. You don't need to go climb after it. You don't need to work hard to acquire it, it's a gift that is given.

And I realized that in the life of the church, so much of what we do operates on that "get in line and make it happen" mode because there are events that need to be planned and coordinated, we need to get food there and the entertainment there--all of those things need to come together in the life of the church. And they do hundreds of times a month, really, in this place. And I think though that underneath that, there's a place of deeper longing, a place of deeper peace. A place that when you think that the diagnosis you've received is the end of what you know was your life, there's a place where you can go and rest in God's love and care and peace for you. Jesus says to each of us, "Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give to you." And I do not give to you as the world gives. I don't expect gratitude, repayment. I don't expect that you would post about this on Instagram or Facebook. I just offer you peace.

For me, at this time of year in the life of the church and in the life of the ebb and flow of our journey together, that's a beautiful thing to know and to remember. That the ground sort of holds our being is peace. That the hands that silently show up to keep us upright and oriented are wholeness. And that when we are tired or concerned or anxious, that peace is already there ministering to us. So my hope as we continue this weekend in the celebration of Memorial Day, but also in the next season of our life together where we come to one worship at 10:00a.m., is that the peace of Christ that we share with one another, while it is between us, we always remember that it's beneath us and around us and within us. And that we continue to grow in our ability to accept that peace and to offer it to others. I believe that that's what we'll celebrate today, that the peace of Christ that is given to us. My prayer is that we can trust that it's not just here that that happens. Amen.