

Homily – 22 May 2022
Rev Judy Steers

John 14.23-29

Jesus answered, "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."

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”

These words of Jesus are not spoken prior to the ascension, but rather, in the last quiet moments, at supper with his friends, prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus also tells them rather cryptically at that point, that the spirit will be with them, and will help them to remember all of the things he said to them.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”

Jesus goes on to say “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. “Do not be afraid”. That is the most commonly appearing commandment in scripture. It’s even the bookends to Jesus’ life. At the end of his life, he says “Do not be afraid”. Before he was even born, the angel visited Mary and greeted her with the words “Do not be afraid”. At his birth, the angels appeared to the shepherds and began their news with the words “Do not be afraid”.

Peace I give you.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

If there is anything we long for right now, it is those two things. But how do we receive peace, in the midst of uncertainty, and as the ripple effects of war in Ukraine are felt throughout the world? How do we ‘not let our hearts be troubled’ when climate, economics, pandemic and the day to day struggles of our lives conspire to deeply trouble our hearts?

What IS the peace that Jesus gives that is not given ‘as the world gives’?

Here is one way I have sought this answer in the past couple of weeks. It has been through the eyes and imaginations of my students at school. I see one class each day, so over the past 10 days I have provoked the students’ imaginations with the question “What is Peace?”

We were not alone on this quest. At the beginning of our class, we read a book together called “What is peace?” It was written and illustrated by Canadian author Wallace Edwards, and published in 2016.

The entire book is simply a series of questions, accompanied by some not-quite-right and slightly unbalanced illustrations. As I begin to read, I encourage the children that, though their tendency might be to put up their hand or call out and answer when someone asks a question, the questions are intended to make us stop and ponder. I like to tell them that being smarter doesn’t mean having the answers. It just means being able to ask better questions: of ourselves, of our stories, of the world.

So, here are some of the questions. I invite you to ponder them as I speak them:

Can you study peace?
Can you learn peace?
Is it a struggle
Is it a lesson?
Do you need to understand it?

Is peace tame?
Is peace wild?
Is it captive
Is it free
Can you put a wall around it?
What is peace?

Can you buy peace
Can you sell peace
Is it expensive?
Is it free?
Can you put a price on it?
What is peace?

Can you break peace?
Can you mend peace?
Is it delicate,
Is it powerful?
Can you find peace in forgiveness?
What is peace?

And there were many more pages and questions.

After our reading, the children were invited to use wood, stone, smooth glass, and fabric materials, on a large black velvet cloth, to create ‘a place of peace’ from their imaginations. What would need to be in a place of peace?

Before I tell you what they made, I'll ask you that question. What would need to be in a place of peace? What would you put in it, if you had to build such a place?

The children's answers and the things they built were about food to share. Farms to grow things. Flowers. Colour. Water to drink - most often they narrated "people are getting water" or "the animals are drinking water" far more than 'water to play in'.

What else was there? Campfire circles. Animals, "because they help us feel peaceful". All the animals were provisioned with food, water and companionship. One boy put a piece of cloth down and some stick figures on it and said "It's a yoga mat. People are doing meditation together and it helps them be peaceful". Often, a child would build a house. Another child added trees - for fruit and climbing and shade. At least once in every class, sometimes more than once, someone alluded to 'safety' - whether that was 'a house to be safe in' or 'a stone fence around the animals to keep out things that would hurt them' or 'a rescue boat just in case'.

None of them mentioned 'an absence of war'. None of them talked about threats of violence, though, if there was an argument about the placement of a certain feature, inevitably one, or many of them would chide "stop. we can't fight when we're making a peaceful place".

"Peace I leave you" was and is a very common Jewish farewell. It simply implied that one wanted the good welfare of the other person. The Greek word implies a joining or knitting back together of all the necessary parts to create wholeness or wellness. Each week we offer peace, we remind each other of peace, we show up to enter again into the task of being people of peace.

What is peace? I'll leave you with the last page of questions from the book -

*"Is peace strong
Is peace gentle?
Is it innocent?
Is it wise?
Will we know it when we see it?
What is peace?"*

May God bless the discovery of those answers in the day to day of our lives.

To read more about Wallace Edwards' book, and his reflections on "illustrating peace", visit this site:

<https://www.thewhig.com/2016/08/31/how-do-you-illustrate-peace>

One of the finished products – this one by Grade 5 – in ‘Building a Place of Peace’
(photo by Elizabeth Breen)

