

The Peace of God

Although the idea of becoming a pastor had niggled at me for many years, I didn't begin a serious exploration of the call to ordained ministry until the early 1990's. At that time, I was a parishioner at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, in Hanover, New Hampshire. "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee," was a well-loved hymn, at St. Thomas, and it became a favorite of mine during this time when I was testing my willingness to embrace what the UCC Statement of Faith calls "the cost and joy of discipleship." (Notice that they put the cost first!)

William Percy's text begins with a simple bucolic scene:

*They cast their nets in Galilee just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down.*

Although the second verse begins with *Contented, peaceful fishermen*, the phrase, "before the Lord came down," warns us that things are about to change:

*Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew
the peace of God that filled their hearts brimful, and broke them too.*

Now, this was interesting—and challenging. I certainly thought of, and had experienced, the peace of God as something that filled my heart, but what did Percy mean when he wrote that the peace of God *broke* the disciples' hearts? The next verse gives us a pretty good hint:

*Young John, who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless, in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head-down was crucified.*

Certainly, there was great and heart-breaking cost for the disciples who followed Jesus. They left their families and their stable livelihoods for a life of itinerant homelessness. They were pushed way beyond their comfort zones to follow and emulate Jesus, being sent out, themselves, to teach and to heal. They were confronted deeply with who they were and asked to become something better. And, in what seemed to be the end, they watched this man they deeply loved, and into whose hands they had placed their lives, lose his life in the most painful and humiliating way the Roman Empire could devise.

Percy goes on to say:

*The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing— the marvelous peace of God.*

You may have your own response to the meaning of these lines, but to me they speak of what I might call both the inner and outer integrity of the peace of God. I saw a poster, years ago, that said, *At the table of peace will be bread and justice.* This points to what I mean by the outer integrity of peace. Peace is not just the absence of overt conflict. A dictatorship or police state may suppress all outward dissent and strife, but this is not God's peace.

When Isaiah speaks of the coming of the Messiah, as we heard in our Hebrew Scripture reading, he tells us that *with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.* God's peace will always, and only, be based on bread— an equitable sharing of resources— and on justice— human systems that are fair to all their members and respect the integrity of God's creation. In one of the loveliest passages in Scripture, Isaiah goes on to describe God's peaceable realm, ending with the memorable words, *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

Those who seek the outer integrity of the peace of God are not guaranteed peaceful lives. They will be called upon to "speak truth to power," as Jesus did, time and time again, calling to account those who oppress the poor and the meek, those who hurt and destroy. Jesus' life ended in an act of unspeakable violence, and many in our own time who have sought the peace of bread and justice, have also paid a heavy price. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oscar Romero come to mind, for me, and I'm sure we could name many others.

I have no way of knowing, but I suspect, that one of the things that drives those who accept the cost of discipleship, is the need to have an inner integrity of peace. People like King and Romero believe that, as followers of Christ, we should *not* make peace with the unjust conditions of our world. Their understanding of God's peace leads them to challenge these conditions and the people who benefit from them. For them, inner peace can only be experienced when their outward actions match their inward convictions.

Matching our outward actions to our inward convictions may become an increasing opportunity and challenge in the world we find ourselves in today. How will we stand with, and for, the people and causes we believe in? How will we seek the inner integrity of the peace of God?

Now I understand how easy it is to become so anxious about the causes that concern us that we lose all peace of mind. And sometimes we need to take a break— including a break from news— just to restore some sense of balance and well-being. You may have heard the term "compassion fatigue." Only a couple of generations ago, news was, for the most part, local. You knew what was going on in your immediate community, and, if there were problems or people in need, you could do something about it. Now we are connected, almost instantly, with the whole world, and we are continually confronted with needs and problems we feel we should address.

But there are just so many of them. And sometimes we get tired, and our ability to care gets tired. In this situation, finding peace with our own capacity to make a difference may mean choosing one or two areas we are passionate about, and trusting that God will find people who are passionate about the others.

When we seek the peace of God, both in the world and in ourselves, we need to be prepared for a certain amount of inner and outer turmoil. But would we want it any other way? Would we be content to accept the kind of peace offered by those who oppress the poor and the meek or who hurt and destroy on God's holy mountain? So let us have the courage to pray for the peace of righteousness and equity, both in our world and in our hearts. "Let us pray for but one thing—the marvelous peace of God."

Amen.