

OUR NEVER-ENDING SEARCH FOR PEACE

Have you noticed how much anger and aggression there is in the world these days? I read a story about a college football player—a star on his team—who had to be physically removed from the drive-through window of a *Taco Bell* restaurant. The big lunk had tried to crawl through it and he got stuck.

Why?

It seems a *Taco Bell* employee had forgotten to give him the Chalupa he had ordered. And when the guy noticed it wasn't in his bag, he became so enraged that he tried to go through the pick-up window and beat up the restaurant worker.

Penny and I had an experience a couple of years ago that I'll never forget. We were riding to the gym and had turned onto the Maine Mall Road. The man driving the car behind us was tailgating. As we approached the intersection where you turn left on Spring Street, the traffic light turned yellow.

Instead of speeding up and rushing through, which, I have to confess, I sometimes do, I was a good boy. I slowed down and came to a stop as the light turned red. Well, the guy in the car behind me obviously thought that was a stupid thing to do, actually slowing down for a yellow light. So, in a huff he pulled out around me and zoomed through the red light. That light had been red long enough that it was a miracle he didn't cause an accident.

What had provoked that guy to drive so recklessly and dangerously, putting himself and—even worse—putting other innocent and unsuspecting drivers at risk of serious injury or death?

Road rage.

We all know about road rage. Maybe we've read about it, or we've been the victim of it, or even, God forgive us, we've victimized someone else because their driving caused us to go off the deep end. Someone cuts you off, or maybe they're not driving fast enough—you know, they're actually going the speed limit—and suddenly you're riding their rear bumper, honking your horn and shouting words that your mother would wash your mouth out with soap for saying.

Do I sound like I'm speaking from first-hand experience?

Statistics show that our society is more prone to fits of rage than ever

before. And not only are we an angry and often violent society, we're also an anxious society. We live in a world of rapid change and increasing instability. Things we used to be able to depend on and put our faith in—a steady, decent-paying job, a stable family, an honest and morally decent church, government and society—aren't nearly as dependable and worthy of our trust anymore.

Many people today live in a constant state of apprehension because they're living from paycheck to paycheck, up to their neck in debt, and realize they're just a job layoff away from financial disaster. Or they're concerned about their health or the health of a loved one. Or they watch the news and feel a sense of despair and fear—if not for themselves, then for their children or grandchildren—because the world seems to be spinning out of control and in danger of imploding.

It's in the midst of all this rage, gunfire, violence, terrorism, fear and anxiety that we hear the words of Jesus, who comes to us this morning and says, "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."

People today spend significant amounts of money on tranquilizers, counselors, dream vacations and other things in a desperate and seemingly endless search to find a sense of peace. But the peace they strive to find is often just temporary, and in the end, ineffective. So it wouldn't be surprising if they took those words of Jesus with a grain—or even a big pile—of salt.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"? Yeah, right. I'm not so sure about that.

You know, Jesus said those words bestowing peace on his disciples at a very turbulent and anxious time that was anything but peaceful. Jesus had just told his disciples that he would soon be taken away from them and killed, and his death would be the result of betrayal and denial by them. So, his disciples were feeling a deep sense of fear, confusion and despair.

And it was at that point, in the very worst situation the disciples could imagine, that Jesus told them he would give them a peace that surpassed all human understanding. Jesus offered a peace that could only come from God, a peace that would overcome any dire situation that life could bring, including death itself.

The Hebrew word for the peace Jesus was talking about is *shalom*.

What is *shalom*?

At its simplest and most basic, *shalom* was summed up by Tanya Ferdinandusz, who wrote: "Peace is not the absence of struggle, but the presence of God." In other words, *shalom* is knowing that our loving God is with us even in the midst of our trials and trouble, and being reassured and calmed

by that divine presence.

Henry Van Dyke described such peace, or *shalom*, this way: “To be glad about life, because it gives you the chance to love and to work and to play and to look up at the stars; to be satisfied with your possessions, but not contented with yourself until you have made the best of your life; to despise nothing in the world except falsehood and meanness, and to fear nothing except cowardice; to be governed by your admirations rather than by your disgusts; to covet nothing that is your neighbor’s except his kindness of heart and gentleness of manners; to think seldom of your enemies, often of your friends, and every day of Christ; and to spend as much time as you can, with body and with spirit, in God’s out-of-doors. These are little guideposts on the footpath to peace.”

And the Apostle Paul described the *shalom*, the peace of Christ that he had in his heart this way, when he wrote, “I have learned in whatever situation I’m in to be content.”

When Paul wrote those words he was in prison, and he knew he was soon going to be executed; and yet he described his spiritual and emotional state as “content.” The reason Paul could find peace and contentment, even his incredibly difficult and harsh situation, is because he had found *shalom*—the peace of Christ that comes from God. Paul believed that no matter what situation he was in, and no matter how great the persecution or opposition he might face, God’s strength, and God’s love in Jesus Christ, was greater.

So, is there anything that’s causing you anxiety right now? Is there something you’re angry over, worried about or afraid of?

Because you’re human, your answer is probably “yes.” Paul may have said, “Have no anxiety about anything,” but we human beings tend to worry about many things. We worry about our young children and our aging parents. We worry about our health, our finances, terrorist attacks, climate change, fires, floods, hurricanes and earthquakes. People, it seems, are worriers by nature; maybe because worrying is ultimately a survival mechanism. If we didn’t worry about some things, we might be caught off-guard about an impending danger and it could lead to a disastrous and even deadly result.

But, although it’s normal, and even natural, for us to worry at times, our Christian faith assures us that we don’t have to let worry have the final word. This morning, Jesus, speaking to us through the Scriptures, is telling us that in the midst of anxiety and upset, we can still experience the sense of peace and assurance that comes from knowing that God is here for us, and is always acting in our lives.

Maybe you’re thinking right now, “Man, I wish I had that kind of peace. How do I find it?”

Well, this may sound trite and simplistic, but in our seemingly endless search to find *shalom*, there are some little things we can do that can help us experience it in our lives. For example, coming to church on Sunday morning like you did today can give you a sense of peace in the midst of life's storms. I mean, don't you feel more at peace now, in this sanctuary, than you did before you entered it?

And on those nights when we find ourselves tossing and turning, and our minds are conjuring up the most awful, worst-case scenarios imaginable, what if we responded by reaching out to God in prayer, and focusing our minds and our hearts on how much God loves us, cares for us and is here for us?

Sometimes when I experience moments of great anxiety and upset, I use a form of prayer in which I literally visualize Jesus in my mind, coming to me, touching me on the shoulder or embracing me, and giving me his peace. I intentionally engage my senses and try to actually see Christ standing there in front of me, feel Christ touch me, and hear Christ speak to me. That might sound a little strange or silly to you, but I can tell you from first-hand experience that it works! Praying in that manner is one way that I personally can find *shalom* and calm in the midst of the inner turmoil I'm experiencing.

In the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle asked, "If God is for us, who is against us?" Paul went on to write, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"

Paul answered his own question a few verses later when he wrote, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's how to experience the kind of peace Jesus was referring to—a peace that transcends every situation and circumstance, even death. Such peace, or *shalom*, doesn't come from within us. We don't generate *shalom* in our hearts; it can only be given to us by God, whose love transcends all the things that cause us worry, fear, concern and anger.

In this mortal life and the broken world we live in, we will never be able to completely avoid people with raging tempers, nights when we have anxious thoughts, or terrible situations that are out of our control. But the blessing of our Christian faith is that, when we do encounter them, we don't have to remain troubled or afraid. Jesus tells us that we can overcome our anxiety and fear

When we trust in the profound love God has for us that was revealed in

Jesus Christ, the love that no one and nothing can separate us from, we will receive the blessing of God's *shalom*—a peace beyond human understanding. A peace that assures us that, no matter how bad things are or how hopeless things seem, whether in life or in death, God is in control and is with us always.

So my prayer this morning is that each of us, in our own individual way, will find and experience genuine *shalom*, the peace of Christ. Because if and when we do, our hearts will never again have to be troubled, and we will no longer need to be afraid.

Thanks be to God. Amen.