
Peace Give I to You

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter 6 – Year C

Peace give I to you.

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Not as the world gives, give I to you.

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Those were the words I sang thirty years ago on the beaches of California. What fun it was! For my summer job, I was working for the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, California, where Lloyd Ogilvie was the senior minister. His Sunday sermons during the church year were almost an hour long; but I was enthralled, so deep and mesmerizing and true was his voice. (He later became chaplain of the Senate.)

Yes, my summer job was to sing on the beaches of California. I was actually paid by Hollywood Presbyterian Church to live in a tiny room with three guys at the beach, and to lead Bible studies and youth groups on the beach of Catalina Island.

I played guitar for those groups on the beach, and in the street; and I learned a lot that summer. My own body has never been bronze and muscular, but I sure saw a lot of those bodies then, playing beach volleyball in the background of our Bible studies.

I sang this song: “Peace give I to you. Not as the world gives, give I to you. Peace give I to you.”

Surely, you may think, that was heaven! What a blissful and peaceful summer. The kind of summer you dream about! But it wasn’t. It was a tough summer. First of all, the three of us guys had problems. Our room was truly tiny. There was no room for any dresser or drawers; we kept our clothes and bags under each of our beds. We walked down a boardinghouse hall to get to the bathroom. Two women were also working with us, and they lived on the floor above us. We were supposed to be a team, working together, so that we could help youth on the beaches of California.

But we spent a lot of time being impatient and frustrated, and trying to figure each other out. We spent a lot of time keeping peace among ourselves, and learning about Christian community. “Peace give I to you,” we sang, but we did not always know what that meant. On the surface, we seemed at peace; but, beneath the peace we sang about, was a lot of un-peace.

Those words, “Peace give I to you,” are taken from this lovely gospel story we have heard this morning, from John, chapter fourteen.

Jesus is about to leave his friends. He is in the upper room, at the last supper, delivering his final words. And he declares that he is giving his disciples peace. It is a grand and lovely promise. But listen to what he says about his peace. He says it is a different kind of peace. It is not a peace like “the world” gives.

There is a difference between the peace of God, and the peace of the world? What is the difference?

First, in the world, peace might mean simply the absence of conflict. And that can be a huge achievement. A peace treaty between two warring countries is hard to negotiate, and we rightly celebrate those truces.

The world's peace can be the absence of war. But, then, it can also be a rigidly enforced peace, as it was in ancient Rome, for instance. The great Pax Romana depended upon strong military enforcement. It was often a violent enforcement of calm behavior.

Of course, even without some higher earthly authority, peace often has to be enforced, like it is with ten-year olds in the car. If you keep your hands on your side of the car, and you do not say such stupid things any more, and if you keep your music to yourself, then we will have peace together. That can be an important peace.

Then, there is the peace that we enjoy when we feel we have rightly earned it. We have peace when we are settled in a comfortable home, when we have a well-paying job, when we have any job which satisfies us.

And, finally, there is a peace we enjoy when we are in healthy relationship. Surely that is a grand peace, and a deeply satisfying peace: when we are at peace with those we love.

As a child, my mother used to ask her father what he wanted for Christmas. That would be my grandfather, whom I never knew well, but who—as I understand it— had a hard life. When his little daughter asked him what he wanted for Christmas, my grandfather had only one answer. “All I want is the peace of God which passes all understanding.”

Ah! What a joy that would be! Peace that passes understanding!

The peace of the world is wonderful, but it often is defined by some external result, isn't it? Peace is the absence of war. It is justice in social relationships. It is calm in our family. It is a comfortable place to live. It is somebody to love, and somebody who loves us.

The peace of God is surely present in all that peace. No question about that.

Still, there are lots of places in the world that seem at peace, when they are not. On the surface, we ourselves seem at peace. Singing songs on the beach, for instance! But often, so very often, beneath the peace we sing about lies a lot of un-peace. It is beneath the surface that we need the peace of God.

The peace of God is deeper than outward appearances. There is a peace of God, one that passes understanding, that can be present with us even when we have no external proof. There is a peace of God that can be present even when it looks like war is all around us, when nothing looks right with the world. Even when we are unhappy and in pain.

It is the peace of God that Jesus gives to his disciples. Jesus declared peace to his disciples even when he knew that he, himself, was about to be betrayed and to be delivered over to his enemies. Jesus was declaring peace even when he knew he was about to suffer.

The peace of God passes understanding. But that does not mean it is passive! The peace of God does not mean simply that we give up, that we decline to enter the fight for justice in the world, or that we become docile and passive in the face of evil and wrong. Again, it is deeper than that.

In fact, it is that deeper peace of God that enables healthy social activism, justice work that clings to hope even when everything looks glum and dark. It is the deeper peace of God that inspires saints to be active in the world, producing those external results.

William Alexander Percy had it right, when he wrote a poem, long ago, about the peace of God. He knew that the peace of God does not always deliver us from the hardship and violence of the world. In fact, the peace of God often leads us into those places of unrest, into those places of harm, into harm's way, because we are meant to be striving for a deeper peace.

And, so, William Alexander Percy wrote a poem that has become one of the great hymns of the Episcopal Church. It goes like this:

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

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

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

*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.*

*(Hymn 661 in The Hymnal 1982.
Words by William Alexander Percy, died 1942)*

The peace of the world is surely something to strive for, and something to enjoy! But the peace of God passes our understanding and delivers something else.

The peace of God is the deep Spirit of creation, the Ruach of God's breath in all living things, the Shalom of right relationship, the pneuma spirit of living energy in Christ, the koinonia of right relationship in all of God's creation. Jesus said,

*Peace give I to you.
Peace give I to you.
Not as the world gives, give I to you.
Peace give I to you.*

AMEN.

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