

My Peace I Give You

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, (2May), 2010.

Text: John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” ~Jesus

In the first days of my recent trip to Europe, I was in Landstuhl, Germany, visiting the big American military hospital there. The patients are from all over Europe but also wounded warriors from Afghanistan and Iraq come there before returning to Bethesda or Walter Reed. My task was to visit some of these and spend time with their caregivers—nurses, chaplains and Corpsmen. Those who give so much to healing the wounded are often themselves traumatized by their work and can suffer ‘care fatigue’ without anyone paying much attention to them. I visited two chaplain-run groups for the wounded, led a Bible Study for the pastoral care staff, and made visits in the wards to both patients and the staff. One of the groups I visited was on the psych wing of Landstuhl called *Spiritual Resources*. None of the participants were older than 25 years, and none of them seemed particularly mentally ill. One of the things during my time there I noticed is that not everyone looks wounded from the outside. The young reserve chaplain who led the *Spiritual Resources* group is a pastoral psychologist back home in Iowa. He was very gentle with the group and had excellent rapport with them. He got each to talk and share with the group. They did not in the least seem bothered by an admiral sitting among them. I noticed during the hour we met that periodically one would get up and leave. They would come back in a moment and resume their participation in the group. After four or five instances of this, I asked what was going on. One of the young women humorously said this was the ‘lobster room.’ “You see that big window, Admiral? The docs come into see us and motion to us to come out for a session. We think we’re like lobsters in a tank at a restaurant!”

The banter was light like this for a while. Some talked more than others but all were engaged. They come to the hospital for a short time and then they leave, going back home. This has made the group very open. After the preliminaries, the chaplain therapist asked them a question about what made for peace in their lives. One by one they answered. One said she found peace running with her iPod playing music while she exercised. Another said he sometimes found it when he was among certain friends. One young woman said she had only rarely known peace in her life but being in her mother’s arms always brought a feeling of security. One said he got it from attending at AA meetings. They all admitted their experience of peace was illusive and transitory. They tried to define it but struggled with that. Finally one

turned to me and said, “Can the Admiral answer the question, too? I’d like to hear what he does to find peace.”

I was a little unsure what to say. I assumed the *Spiritual Resources* group was not supposed to be confessionally Christian, so I treaded lightly. What struck me was how all their answers presumed what peace was and sought it. But also that everything they said referred to what they *did* to try artificially to trigger the experience of serenity. So I said, “There was once a great religious leader who said: ‘*My peace I give you.*’ What I notice about what all of you have said is that you have tried to get peace by certain actions on your part. What if peace is not something you do for yourself or to yourself, but rather only something you can receive as a gift?” There was silence in the group, the kind you experience when a speaker has struck a nerve and is onto something. They began, one by one, to respond to this new thought that had never occurred to them. One said, “How do you know it when you receive it as a gift?” Another, “I’ve spent my whole Army career trying to be in charge. Are you telling me I have to admit I can’t do it by myself but must wait for someone else to do it for me?” Another, “I think I know what you are talking about. I have only known hints of peace. Though it is an inner state, it usually comes from outside me, despite what I do or don’t do.” Another, “You mean I have to *wait* for it?”

The one who had spoken most freely in the group had by now revealed his habit for self medication with alcohol. He was the one most into control and seemed most puzzled—yet intrigued—by my statement that peace was not something he could arrange or accomplish but something that must instead be received as a gift. He talked about the importance to himself of being in charge and having power over his emotions. Yet he admitted he was out of control usually and wondered if his attempts to try and manage peace were the reasons it had proved so illusive in his life. I didn’t say much; nor did the pastoral therapist. We let them talk and explore the thought of peace as a gift. Interestingly no one asked me who said peace was a gift. They may have all known it was Jesus, but I suspect not. Had I mentioned he was the one who had said this truth they might have been surprised that it seemed so close to where they were. They instinctively knew that it must have something to do with spirituality and religion, yet they were unclear just where it fit.

I spoke again at their invitation. “So much that torments us comes from our confusion, hurt, dysfunctions and history of loss and grief. We know something is missing but are not quite sure how to find it. What if in turning to God in faith we experience serenity as a gift? What if we were to stop striving to find and manufacture it ourselves? What if peace is free and offered without strings by the One who knows our troubles and problems, our hurts and suffering?” I spoke to them about laying down our problems and offering them up to the One who made us and knows us better than we know ourselves. “Let God do the heavy lifting for a while and stop trying so hard to drag all these burdens around by yourselves.”

There is a universal truth here. From the famous *Twelve Steps*, the first three:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

It is said that these great principals of Alcoholics Anonymous come from the same spiritual universals that I have been talking about this morning, the same things Jesus taught long ago to his disciples. I was struck in that small group of young people how they were mesmerized by Jesus' teaching and, in a way, how desperate they were to know the truth that he taught, how very practical it was in their lives. There is a tyranny in what is commonplace. Because we know sayings like this one of Jesus so well, we miss its application in our lives. We can be so close to the forest that we miss the great tree right before our eyes.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” So said Jesus, just before he left his disciples, just before his crucifixion. Not everyone's wounds show. Some of us are dragging around old wounds from family dysfunction, alcohol, old hurts and grudges. The weight is almost unbearable. And yet we have soldiered on, gamely putting on a good outward face. But inside there is a hole. All our attempts to fill the hole with self-help have not worked a lasting satisfaction. What if what we seek is right before us, *a gift*, not something to be managed or achieved? We are more subtle than that poor young woman in the Landstul group who missed her mother and said so. But all of us know what she longed for. What if the answer is here, at this table, in this book, in a new relationship with the one who made us, in Jesus?

End

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