

## My Peace I Give to You

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*Texts: John 14: 23-29*

A while back, a beloved colleague and mentor of mine told me she was leaving the area for a new job on the West Coast. It sounded like a fantastic opportunity, the perfect fit for her gifts. She was thrilled, and I was thrilled for her, so I shared my heartfelt congrats and started grilling her enthusiastically about her next steps. After a short time, we both fell silent, and I could feel that “but what does this mean for me?” pit start to open in my guts. She’s one of those people from whom I learn something vital and lasting every time I am with her. She’s been a rock for me at times when I’ve felt shaky. More importantly, she’s challenged me to feel shaky at times when I’ve felt like a rock! I remember pouting for a bit as I pondered the impending loss. And then, with God’s help, I’m sure of it, I was able to force a surprisingly genuine dose of courage and calm down my throat, sort of like when I was a kid eating broccoli. I didn’t *want* to swallow it! Doing so meant accepting that she was leaving and that one of my key go-to people when the going gets tough would not be around. Though it didn’t taste great going down, once it was in my belly, I knew it would be okay, even good for me, and not only because I knew it was good for her and for those with whom she would work.

I trust we can all relate to this feeling. For some, it may arise in this season of graduations, goodbyes, and transitions. I know many of us are feeling it today as we prepare to say farewell to our fabulous ministerial intern Ebony before she leaves us and continues to follow her call to military chaplaincy! I also wonder if the disciples in our reading for today knew something like this feeling when their risen teacher told them that he’d be leaving them, again. You see, on our liturgical calendar, it’s still the season of Easter, and the risen Christ has one more week before his final leave-taking and ascension to prepare a place for us in the eternal home and presence of God. No more breakfasts on the beach or walks on the Emmaus Road. Just when the disciples and we get used to having him around again, he’s off. Yet, in this so-called farewell discourse in John, Jesus offers us his parting words of peace and promise: Peace I leave with you! My peace I give to you!

How lovely and comforting at first, but truth to tell, when you think about how grief-stricken and terrified the disciples must have been, they start sounding more like a bunch of broccolis to me, like something hard to swallow, then as now. As one commentator has noted, Jesus is standing here like a mother with her hand on the doorknob about to leave her children on the floor. She knows she’ll see them again. She knows the caregiver is capable. The caregiver knows he can handle the situation. But the children are all left asking the same question: But what about me? What will happen to me when you aren’t here?

We know this question. Kids ask it all the time; bless them! Sometimes, if we are feeling alone, abandoned, left out, or left holding the ball, or if we are in the midst of some loss or fear, we feel it too, though we may not dare to give it words. Since Covid, consider the family members - over 1 million Americans this week, over 15 million worldwide - who have been left asking some version of those disbelieving questions: “what about me? how will I get by without you?” If you need further illustration, just yesterday the New York Times offered a heart wrenching feature of 13 final text exchanges from

loved ones lost to covid, often sent from the isolation of hospital beds when no visitors were allowed. Here's just one sample? "Intubation soon. Love you all and love each other. Look out for Lucia." Reply: "Love you... We will...God is with you."

And we, too, earnestly pray that God's peace is with them all and with us. Yet heavy as all these parting words are, I imagine that for Jesus, the "what about me?" questions that arise in our individual and family lives, and losses would extend into similar questions about our wider social fabric and systems. Consider too all those who by virtue of their race, class, gender or education feel marginalized, disconnected from, if not outright abandoned by, our culture and society. Seen in this broader light, the 'what about me' questions are cries not merely for pastoral care and compassion but cries for dignity and justice and equality, too!

Back to our passage: I see Jesus's gift of peace to his heartbroken followers not merely as offering profound comfort and consolation, the kind of words that go down easy, but they also carry a sense of challenge and exhortation, as well! Remember, we are meeting the disciples here at a moment when they're considering, with grudging anticipation, what their lives and community will be like without their beloved mentor and rabbi. Since Easter, they are, however unwittingly, undergoing an extraordinary shift from being followers of Christ to being leaders in the early church! You see, Jesus is not merely speaking words of assurance when he says, "my peace I leave with you." He's passing them and us a mantle! He's passing the mantle of God's peace to their hearts so that they will, along with the Spirit, have what it takes to finish what he started. To follow him, to want to be like Jesus, as we just sang, to want to have his peace in our heart, is to want to be leaders and peace and justice makers ourselves. Far from passive recipients, we are called to be initiators of and ambassadors for this peace in the world! What's more, imagine that it's precisely in those existential "what about me?" moments of grief and pain, times when we are most vulnerable, that the Spirit is beginning to move us, from vulnerability and suffering into ever deeper solidarity with the suffering world around us. Rest assured. The consolation comes to us right where we need it. Peace I leave with you, he says! But God doesn't stop there. Christ says it twice! The exhortation follows the consolation: *My peace I give to you. My peace*, which means it's a peace for sharing. *My peace*, which means it's a peace with justice, a peace you won't fully know until the entire whole world knows it. *My peace*, which means it already-but-not-yet with us, so I'm passing this baton to you to carry on the work. In these ways, God's peace enters in, disturbs and agitates our lives and changes the way we look at ourselves and others.

I encountered some similar dynamics this past week in conversations with some of my Black colleagues and friends. Some, I sense, are feeling abandoned, not by God mind you, but by white people, even and especially progressive white people who say they are all about Black Lives Matter-ing. And yet consider the gulf in our experiences in this last week. Black bodies and hearts are feeling the wounds of last weekend's violence in Buffalo not only deeply and viscerally, but systemically and historically, every day, every week. As one truth-telling Black leader put it this week, "there is no difference between what happened in Buffalo and Emmet Til!" These horrific incidents are not isolated tragedies that call for speeches, thoughts and prayers. They are long-standing patterns that require a sweeping federal initiative and tangible resources to combat the ongoing domestic terrorism of white supremacy. On that same call, and it was an antiracist training for white folks, this Black leader spontaneously called up all the white men on the call. We were a minority since most on the call were women. He told us to raise our hands using the little icons in the corner of the Zoom screen, so he could see us together and talk to us specifically. He proceeded to cold call us by name, whether he knew us or not. He asked us to work with provocative questions like: 'Where are *you* right now in this struggle

against white supremacy?’ ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what was last Sunday like for you? How are you witnessing such brutality without freezing up or ignoring it? What are you saying to white boys and white young men in your life to change the culture?’ The responses were mixed. One simply said: ‘I’m 59 years old and I didn’t start to think about any of this until I was 57.’ The sadness in that honesty and recognition was palpable, and the leader allowed at least a minute of silence after he said it to let it sink in for all of us. Another confessed: ‘I think I’m fearful of talking to white friends about this at work or in my family,’ to which the leader paused and then responded, in a moment of poised and loving instruction, man to man, brother to brother: ‘That fear is what keeps *you* safe and what keeps people like me being brutalized, if not by actual violence then by policies, through laws and in countless other ways.’ Another shared that for him, he was beginning to let this deep and historic pain into his body, but it was still “episodic,” and which of us white people can’t relate? Then the leader as much as told us: *That’s the problem! That’s the difference!* And until more white men, and others, start experiencing in our bodies the ways that our history and system leave us all stuck, frozen, traumatized, unhealed and unfree, the changes we so desperately want and need, and I would add, the peace that Christ gives and promises, will ...not ...come. The conversation went on, but it was just the kind of real-talk provocation and refreshingly honest accountability we all desperately need a whole lot more of!

Friends, the peace that Christ’s leave us is not merely for the taking. He says it: “Peace I leave with you! My Peace I give to you.” At first glance, these words sound like pure comfort. They go down easily and without fuss. Yet please, please don’t miss the challenge in them too! Because of their source, they invite us to ask our “what about me?” and our “what will happen to me?” questions in a far more communal and empowered light! They invite us to move from the existential ‘what about me?’ question to the social and political “what about us?” questions for always the two are bound. The peace of Christ is an exhortation for us not merely to follow his way, but to lead the charge and the change in his absence. So, I ask you, and I’m asking this of myself ...what are you doing to be a *leader* or ambassador for his peace and justice in this world? Waiting for other leaders to step up does not count. Reading the New York Times or the latest book about climate change, Ukraine, or race in America, doesn’t count! Attending a lecture after church with a genuine ambassador of peace (it was practically her job title - Susie Hayward, - maybe a good a start, especially if we are motivated today to take some action together. Writing letters and checks, calling legislators, marching, organizing for change, serving the poor, supporting black and brown businesses, divesting from extractive corporations, supporting reparations, changing our wills to redistribute our wealth, supporting indigenous landback and legislative efforts, that may start to count! Examining and changing our everyday practices and the ways that we do and don’t show up to the work, that way we are and are not complicit in cultures of white supremacy, that may start to count!

Today, we remember the promise of our Lord that he is leaving us the Holy Spirit as an advocate for all and thank God because we need *all* the help we can get. As always, we remember Jesus. Let us hear his call to God’s peace as a disturbance of *our* peace, disrupting our silence and complicity, drawing us into relationship and action. Jesus is setting the stage for us all to be not merely passive recipients of peace but leaders for it, and emissaries of God’s grace, and he is asking us to find through our own lived experience of grief and loss our deepest appetite for solidarity and change. So, feast your hearts on his words. Peace I leave with you! Swallow them whole and let them nourish you to live lives of love and service, to be followers of Him always and also leaders in his name! Amen.