

May 22, 2022 – Sixth Week of Easter

“PEACE, SHARED COMPASSION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Now may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As I read through the lessons for this week, I was struck by both the gospel and the lesson from Acts. Each in their own way show us that the gospel, the good news of Jesus is not meant to be some secret kept just between a chosen few, and that understanding does not happen with just one encounter, but over time we grow and discover how faith not only changes us but helps us and those who surround us.

When Jesus is talking with his disciples, he is giving them what we might call his advance directives. In those directives he is not only telling them what is going to happen to him, but how even in his leaving them they will still have help in what they are to do. That is help that you and I still have, in and through the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus is not leaving his disciples then, or you and me today, without help. Help that comes via the Holy Spirit and the promise of peace that does not come from the world.

There are two words for peace, the Hebrew: shalom, and the Greek: eirene, either might have been used here. It was the Hebrew, shalom which we know means: wholeness, and completeness of life. This is the peace that Jesus gives to us that the world cannot give. The Greek word, eirene, which would mean that we are calm, relaxed, having cocktail time or how I feel after I have had a pedicure...it is worldly peace. The peace that Jesus is talking about comes from the Holy Spirit, and the world try as hard as it might, cannot even come close to giving us peace.

It has been over two years now I believe since I started the meditative prayer twice a week and I must say that twenty minutes of canting, silence, and prayer give me such a feeling of peace, and when circumstances happen such that I do not take that time, I miss it. In a world that seems to thrive on chaos, maybe we would all be better off if we took time to be in silence and if just for a short time experience the peace...shalom that Jesus offers to us.

Now, when I looked at the reading from Acts, we have Paul having a vision and in it he is directed to go to Macedonia. Now, Paul's ministry was to share the good news with the Gentiles. Even with that being his ministry, when he would go into Gentile territory, he would also seek out the Jewish community as well. When he reached Philippi, which was a Roman colony, he did locate the Jews and it must have been a small community, since it seems they did not have a synagogue to worship at on the sabbath. Instead, they gathered outside the city gate by the river. I found it interesting that it does not say that there were men present, but there were women and that is who he spoke to. One woman in particular, Lydia, is singled out as not only a worshiper of God, but that she must have also been a woman of means since she was a dealer of purple cloth, which was a very expensive cloth and only people of means or royalty wore it. Yes, even though it was a man in Paul's vision, it was a woman who is baptized along with her household, and the first thing she does is offer hospitality to Paul.

What I see in these two lessons is the beginning of why you and I are here today. I like to think in one way or another the Holy Spirit had a part to play in it. Now, I was baptized at Central Lutheran Church, in Minneapolis, Minnesota in April of 1954 and I truly believe that was the beginning of my faith journey. Now, of course it could have basically ended there, but it did not. I spent many Sundays along with weekdays in that church building. Then it became Faith Lutheran in Balsam Lake, Wisconsin, until my ordination and since then there have been three different congregations that have been the place that I spent most of my Sundays and weekdays. The thing is the journey is not over yet.

Each one of you have a journey story that has brought you to this place at this time. How many of you are like me and have only been a part of the Lutheran denomination? How many began there tried out a different denomination and came back? How many started out in a different denomination and landed here? Not a single one of us did that on our own. There were people who brought us, offered us hospitality, taught us, encouraged us, loved us, and by the power of the Holy Spirit opened us up to the peace that comes from Jesus, that the world cannot give. I am a firm believer that faith does not happen by serendipity, and it is not nor was it ever meant to be a solitary endeavor.

I read a short article the other day that talked about the size of congregations and how 80% of congregations worship 100 members or less on any given Sunday, and many of them have a woe-is-me mentality. They look at the mega congregations and think that they are doing so much more and are a healthier than they are. But are those mega congregations really doing more and healthier? This congregation has been in Fernandina Beach for over 55 years. Yes, there were years that the membership was larger than it is now, but ministry has never stopped happening no matter what the size has been. Look around you, see any new faces? I do, and especially over the past two years there have been many new faces among us. Yes, some familiar faces of years past are no longer here...some by entering the church eternal and some because they have moved to different communities, but ministry has never stopped, even over all those years or over the past two years of covid. The Holy Spirit has been at work in this place. Oh, that does not mean we will never have challenges, as a matter of fact we have a couple big ones before us in the very near future, with a HVAC that needs to be replaced, a roof that also needs to be replaced, and a mortgage that will need to be refinanced. Amid all that we will continue to gather, to share in God's Word, and to have it give us a peace that the world cannot give to us, that just like Paul who spoke with the women by the river on the sabbath, and just as Lydia's heart was opened that day, there will be hearts opened here by the Holy Spirit. See, we are woven together by faith in Jesus Christ. For see, we *are* the Body of Christ in this place, in this time. A place where we can find the peace that passes all understanding. A place where we can find shared compassion, caring and love. A place where the Holy Spirit is at work among you and me, and has been in the past, is with us today and will be into the future. Amen.