



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott Schul

8th Sunday after Pentecost: July 15, 2018

Sermon Title: "Peace"

Sermon Texts: Mark 6:14-29; Psalm 85:8

The day was ending, and the pastor was packing up her things to go home for the evening. But before she could arise from her desk, a young man politely knocked on the door of the pastor's study. "Do you have a moment? I need to speak with a pastor." Not knowing what might be going through the young man's head, the pastor stopped what she was doing and invited him into the study. "How can I help you?"

Words excitedly spilled from his mouth. "I'm new to this whole faith thing. My parents never went to church and I never grew up with this stuff, but I think I want to be a *Christian!*" Suppressing her excitement at the possibility of a new member, the pastor gently questioned the enthusiastic new convert. "So tell me. *Why* exactly do you want to be a Christian? What drew you to this new way of life?"

The young man explained that for some time he'd been wanting to turn his life around. Not sure what path to take, he'd stumbled onto some TV preachers, and he became convinced that following Jesus was the way to go. The pastor pressed him. "What exactly does 'following Jesus' mean to you?" He continued, "Well, it means Jesus is my way out. If I'm obedient – if I'm a good person – he's going to make me prosperous. My bills will be paid. My life will be in order. I'll get a good job. And then there's my mom; she has cancer. If I've got Jesus on my side, she'll get better. With Jesus on my side, everything's finally going to go right for me!"

The pastor took a deep breath and invited the young man to open a Bible. Together they read of Christ's trial and crucifixion. They read of Stephen's martyrdom. They read about the beatings and arrests Paul endured. And finally, they read today's Gospel lesson, about the beheading of arguably the greatest prophet of all, John the Baptist. As they finished, the young man sat back in his chair, with a shell-shocked look on his face. Before the pastor could say a word in response, the young man dashed out of the study, and was never seen again.

Maybe, after hearing today's Gospel reading, you feel tempted to dash away too, just like the young man in my story. Today's Gospel isn't exactly a convincing pitch for the Christian life, is it? Here in State College, it's highly unlikely anyone's going to lose their life because they are a follower of Jesus. But it does happen in other parts of the world. And though we *here* may be safe from execution, there's nothing about being a Christian that guarantees life will always go our way. The Bible makes that abundantly clear, and we know it from our own experience too. Good and faithful people suffer hardships on a daily basis: health problems, car accidents, family discord, financial setbacks, and disappointments at school and work. Lives are shattered because of racism, sexism, discrimination, or someone else's tragically bad decision.

Even the most faithful follower of Jesus Christ is not immune to life's hardships. After all, if it could happen to John the Baptist, believe me, it could happen to *any* of us.

And so what do we do? Just grin and bear it and pray for an early death? Is being a Christian a matter of putting up with suffering during this life so we can enjoy the payoff someday in heaven? I don't think so. Jesus has a gift for us through which heaven's hopeful light can shine upon us each and every day. We see it in today's Psalm. It's there on the cover of your bulletin: "You speak peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you."

Peace is Christ's daily gift to us. That word permeates the Holy Bible. 238 verses in the Old Testament and 86 verses in the New Testament contain the word "peace." To be clear, we're not talking now about *external peace* – the absence of fighting and war. We fervently pray for *that* peace, but as long as humans sin, there will *always* be fighting and conflict.

The peace Jesus promises us is a different kind – it is *internal peace*. Luther described it as a "calm and joyful heart" even in the midst of worldly conflict, and a confidence and boldness that fills one's heart with courage¹ so that we can keep pressing forward, loving God and loving neighbor. It's a sense of tranquility and stillness that despite the chaos of life, things will be OK. Pastor Lynn has described it as resting in the calm eye of a violent storm. This peace though is more than wishful thinking or naïve optimism. It is a calmness and an assurance grounded on the steadfast promise of Jesus himself. Peace is his gift, something we cannot create, something we can only humbly receive.

Jesus emphasized the importance of peace when he made it the focus of his final prayer with his disciples, as he prepared them for his coming arrest and crucifixion.² Peace was also the first word of greeting and assurance the resurrected Jesus spoke to his frightened and confused band of disciples when he came to them in the Upper Room.³

Peace was a blessing Jesus frequently bestowed upon those he healed, because he knew that a restored body was of limited benefit if that body carried a scared and broken heart.⁴ Peace is a major topic within Paul's New Testament letters too. Paul describes the essence of God's character and identity as peace.⁵ For Paul, peace is also a prime way of describing the Kingdom of Heaven.⁶ This mystical gift - this peace of Jesus Christ - passes all understanding,⁷ and reassures us that in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are saved.⁸ Peace is a fruit and blessing of the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives,⁹ and was considered by Paul to be so integral to the Christian life that a greeting of peace was a standard feature of his correspondence to the Church.¹⁰

Once in a while, a skeptic asks me why I devote so much time and energy to this Jesus character. They say, "Isn't he just another ancient myth?" My response is to point to the first disciples. They were tragically flawed people - selfish, timid men who abandoned Jesus in his darkest hour of need. There was no indication that any of them would have the faith or the guts to lead this movement once Jesus was executed. But something profound changed within them just a few days later. Those flawed followers were transformed into lions of faith. Certainly a large part of that came from the experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus. But that experience

maintained its power in their lives because it also cloaked them in peace. Maybe that's why for nearly 2,000 years a key component of Christian worship has been that moment where we take hold of one another, look each other in the eyes, and say those sacred words: "Peace be with you." Every time we pass the peace, we are preaching a mini sermon of hope to one another that proclaims, "Yes, the world *is* a mess, but we can live in confidence and joyful hope because we rest in the gift and promise of the peace of Jesus Christ."

Friends, we all know that we live in troubled times of division and conflict. But this world has seen and survived times like that before. Today can't be any worse than the 14th century, which was consumed with wars, corruption, and a plague that wiped out nearly half of Europe's population. In the midst of all that suffering, a woman known as Julian of Norwich prayed fervently to Jesus for hope and guidance. The words of *peace* that came to her all those centuries ago are still treasured today. "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." It's true. All *shall* be well, because we have Jesus, and Jesus has us. Peace be with you. Amen.

Footnotes:

- 1 Luther's Works 24, pp. 419-422
- 2 John 16:33
- 3 Luke 24:36; John 20:19
- 4 Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50, 8:48
- 5 Col. 14:33
- 6 Rom. 14:17
- 7 Phil. 4:7
- 8 Rom. 5:1
- 9 Col. 1:20
- 10 See, e.g., Rom. 1:7