

Sermon Series on the Fruit of the Spirit

Week #4: Joy & Peace

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Over the past 3 weeks, we have used our sermon series time to delve into 6 aspects of the fruit of the Spirit: kindness, generosity, patience, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. There are 3 elements of the fruit of the Spirit left to explore: peace, joy, and love. I think it is interesting that these 3 – peace, joy, and love - are also important Advent themes for our Sundays leading up to Christmas. There is so often a kind of symmetry that links the Old and the New Testaments; there are patterns and ideas that span both forms of Scripture. And it is in the key ideas that we can begin to uncover and begin to understand the unchangeable character of God.

This week's focus is on joy and peace; two words that have long been linked to Christianity. In our Old Testament passage from the book of Numbers, we hear God speaking directly to Moses, giving him a particular blessing to share with the people of Israel. The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Torah, or Pentateuch, and has particular significance even today for the Jewish community because it chronicles events that occurred during the many years of travel from Egypt to the Promised Land. But the blessing that God gives to Moses is one that we are also familiar with; one that we often hear at the end of morning prayer: "The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face shine on us and be gracious to us. The Lord look upon us with favour and grant us peace." These very important historical words that we hear at the close of a service are the same ones that God gave to Moses; these are the same words that were spoken to the Israelites after gatherings such as worship. They were words intended to reassure the people of God's continuing presence and blessing, a way to fortify them for the journey ahead. I like to think that these same words fortify us for our journey into the week that lays before us each Sunday as we leave this place and return again to living out the Gospels in our community.

Psalm 85 was chosen for this morning because it speaks directly to the concept of peace, but also helps us to understand the relationship between peace, faithfulness, love, and righteousness. It was originally a prayer for divine favour and blessing. But there is an emphasis on peace and salvation because the people of Israel have been in conflict with other tribes and nations for an extended period of time. They want to experience a time when things are much less tumultuous so that they can shift their energies towards worshipping God and living out lives that are marked by faithfulness and righteousness. We have a saying in our contemporary culture that peace is more than just the absence of war. And this psalm really gets at the heart of that idea.

Our Gospel passage from John, Jesus is with 11 of his disciples. Christ has just named Judas as the betrayer and has just told Simon Peter that he will deny him 3 times before the rooster crows to mark the end of the night and the start of day. Jesus knows what is coming next; his arrest, his torture at the hands of Pontius Pilate, and his crucifixion. Right after speaking to the disciples one last time, Jesus will go out the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. We can only imagine how he must be feeling. But he uses these precious last moments to try to summarize his most important messages for the remaining disciples. He wants to capture the essence of his 3-year ministry for them with his final words, and we have to be in awe of the courage and the conviction that this must have taken. If I knew that I was about to be arrested and killed in a very violent and horrific way, I would certainly not be so brave as to come back here to this pulpit and try to summarize the Gospels for you while I waited for soldiers and an angry mob to take me away. But that is exactly what Christ did. The disciples, of course, cannot understand what he is really telling them; it will only be after the events surrounding the crucifixion and the resurrection 3 days later that they will even start to connect the dots. But Jesus begins by telling them to not be troubled by what is coming, that they must rely on their faith. He is telling them that, through his death and resurrection, he is preparing a place for them in eternity. He is going to endure a very terrible death, but he will return from this event after he has gone to the Father. Jesus reminds them that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that accessing God can only happen for them if they go through Christ. He is speaking of the Trinity here,

trying to explain the inexplicable that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as one. Having seen Christ, they have effectively seen God. Jesus goes on to say that God will send the Spirit to remain with them, to teach them truth, to give them a kind of peace that transcends the human concept of peace. They will not be alone as they continue the mission of building up what will become known as the Christian Church; the body of Christ. He then says something very profound: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." I think it is so poignant that Jesus would focus his words on peace when he knows that he is about to meet a very violent end. The fact that he does so is a true testament to his faith and to his love for his friends. The passage finishes with Christ challenging the 11 disciples to not be troubled or afraid, but instead to rejoice in the fact that he is going to his Father. This is where the concepts of joy and peace come together. The disciples, of course, are very confused by all of this. It will take time and the resurrection and the ascension for them to even start to understand the prophesy that Jesus is giving them. But we know from history that this message that was delivered to them in Christ's final hours will eventually sink in and make sense to them. We know this because many of Christ's followers will, themselves, meet very violent deaths and become early martyrs of the newly emerging Christian Church. I believe that it was this example of courage and faith that Jesus gave them in this passage that helped those who became martyred to pass through those very painful deaths with a certainty that God and Christ would be waiting for them in eternity where they would experience the joy and peace that only comes from the Divine one.

What God asked of Jesus and of the disciples was on a scale of sacrifice that we really have trouble understanding because we live relatively stable and secure lives in this part of the world and at this point in history. There are places in the world today where I could expect to be arrested or killed for leading a service like this, and I am deeply grateful that I don't have that kind of concern living in this community. But the fact that I have that kind of security and freedom makes it all the more poignant that Paul is simply asking me to live my life in a manner that invites and cultivates the fruit of the Spirit in my life. When we think of Paul's message in relation to what Jesus and other martyrs have endured for their faith, it seems pretty straightforward. Paul calls us to set aside the passions and desires

that are so characteristic of our human tendencies and instead focus on belonging to the crucified and resurrected Christ, to live and be guided by the same Spirit that Jesus left with the disciples in those final hours. Paul reminds us again this morning that, when we do, we will experience the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes as being comprised of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. Amen.