

"The Peace of Christ"

He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of the Father.

(from The Nicene Creed)

In his reflection on the scripture (John 14:27), "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth, give I unto you," Rev. Tony Robinson wrote: "The world offers three kinds of peace. There is the peace of the palace, of having all the stuff, all the best stuff. There is the peace of the fortress, of having high walls, impregnable defenses. And there is the peace of escape, of "getting away from it all." All have, to be sure, their attraction. The Peace of God? None of the above. Pastor Fred Craddock explained: "The peace of God is the confidence that God is God and neither our gains nor our losses are ultimate. It is the truth that God loves the world, is for all creatures, and is present with us in every endeavor to make real that love in concrete ways. Hassles as we go through life neither prove nor disprove God's presence and therefore neither create nor void the peace of God." Oddly enough, the world's three forms of peace—palace, fortress, escape—all take us out of the world. The peace of God sends us into the world, there to live as ministers of reconciliation and joy. (UCC Daily Devotional, Easter)

Last Thursday, May 25, was Ascension Day. It's the day people of resurrection faith celebrate the victorious return of the Risen Jesus to the right hand of God. The gospel writer Luke records it twice, the first time at the end of his gospel. In Luke 24:50-53 he wrote: 'When Jesus had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple praising God.' In this first account, praise and joy dominated their worship time together.

The second version of the story appeared right after verses 1-5 of chapter 1 in his account of the birth of Christ's Church. Luke wrote: 'In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that



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Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

After those words, the crowd asked Jesus a clarifying question about mission: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" In her commentary on this verse Laurel Dykstra wrote: 'In a final, over-the-demonstration of "not getting it," an unspecified group of followers demand to know if the resurrected Jesus will take up a national and military agenda. My crude paraphrase is: "Great, you're not dead. Now are we going to kick some Roman butt and take our rightful place as kings?"' (Christian Century, May 2008, p. 48) Definitely not! that's not what the kingdom of God is about, Jesus replied. And as to the time that God's reign of Love will be victorious on earth: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Then, after saying these things he was 'taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight' (vs. 9). While Jesus ascended, his 'Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth' (title of W. Brueggeman's book) on-looking friends, were clothed with the promise of power of the Holy Spirit, and given the pulse-racing work of telling the gospel story in their home (Jerusalem), to their nearest relations and friends (Judea), to their enemies (Samaria), and to everybody else (to all the world).

In the 'United Church Statement of Faith' we find this affirmation of faith: 'In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, You have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself.'

Luke's second version of Jesus' ascension grounds followers of Jesus in his life's work, and authorizes the Church's mission of spreading gospel Love. It grants peace and assurance to those taking up Jesus' justice and pastoral work of standing in solidarity with the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and imprisoned. In every generation it gives courage to congregations who engage in the reconciling ministries of forgiveness, non-violence, sacrifice, and self-giving service.

Today, for the last Sunday of Eastertide, we have a section from Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. It's from the gospel according to John and is a prayer in which Jesus prays for himself and for his disciples. Let peace fill your hearts as you overhear Jesus ask God for that which would give him eternal joy.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf, I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them. and now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.