

## **“Peace to you”**

### **A sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant (4/8/18)**

*(Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31)*

When Ruth and I first moved to the small gulf country of Kuwait in 2003, which was our first time in the Middle East, in many ways we were ill prepared. We didn't know the customs, and we didn't know Arabic, so we enrolled in language classes as soon as we arrived. Other than the Arabic alphabet, one of our first lessons went over greetings. “Salaam alaykum” which literally means “Peace to you” and “Wa alaykum a salaam” which means “and peace to you”. And so we practiced it back and forth. The word “salaam” is a version of the its sister word “shalom” which is Hebrew for the same concept: Peace. The Aramaic word, which is most likely what Jesus used, was “salem”, again with the same meaning: Peace. They are all derivatives of the Semitic root word: Shalem (which means completeness, soundness, wholeness, welfare and peace). And within the passage in John 20, we see the greeting “Peace to you” three times. Though Jesus most likely used a phrase much closer to “salaam alaykum” (Arabic) – “salem alaykem” (Aramaic), rather than “shalom” (its Hebrew version), the concept of “shalom” is still vibrant and provides a framework for processing the world around us. The idea of making complete again echoes the Hebrew idea of Tikkun Olam, the idea that the world is full of shattered pieces and we are a part of bringing all the shards back together again: Restoration. So, in this way, Shalom is about much more than simply “peace”; it's about restoration and justice.

So Jesus tells his followers three times, “Peace to you”. And I can't help but think in this context that Jesus was digging deeper into the word, and creating a deeper context in its use. Though the writer of John, of course, has translated the word into the Greek word “eirene”, “peace”, you and I know Jesus wasn't speaking Greek at the time. Instead, Jesus most certainly used a word close to its Semitic root-word “shalem”, also “peace” but with a deeper understanding within its context. So, here was a perfect intersection of reality and faith, doubt and the miraculous. And an opportunity to receive this blessing from the risen Messiah: A restorative peace—a restoring of Jesus from death to life: Peace to you; a restoring of hope to hopelessness: Peace to you; a restoring of wholeness where everything was just broken—physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally: Peace to you. While this passage is often cast into the light of a disbelieving Thomas, there seems to be something more essential at work, and that is, the blessing Jesus is pouring out on his followers: Peace to you. Jesus is building a foundation of Shalom. He brings “peace” to them over and over, and without delay, gifts them with an empowering spirit, the Holy Spirit, the “comforter”; if there was ever a moment of raising another's consciousness, helping them to embrace what is their humanity and what is the divine, it is in this moment: Peace to you. And so I look out among you, my spiritual community, both those present and not, my spiritual siblings, my fellow sojourners on this incredible journey: Peace to you!

For many of us, this restorative peace, begins within us, deep in the recesses of our mind and heart. The shattered areas of our life call to us, an agonizing scream for help, and we often wonder “Will there be a ‘Peace to you’ moment?” I was humbly reminded when speaking with a friend this past week in regards to being honest with ourselves. He said, “You know all about honesty. You lead a contemplative community.” I simply nodded, waiting for what would come next (because I wasn't completely sure of the connection between the two). He continued, “You know, in the Sermon on the Mount...” Again I nodded (not feeling fully honest myself in that moment because I wasn't making the connection yet). “You know, when Jesus said ‘blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God’.” Then it hit meet me

squarely between the eyes. “Pure in heart” requires true, honest, self-examination. Those who achieve such self-candor and find their authentic “me” —no fluff, no bravado, no façade, no window-dressing, no fake smiles, no bluff, just truly genuine “me”, these are the ones who actually see God. They can more easily discover God within themselves, and discover God’s presence all around them. It’s not to say we can’t meet or even interact with God while in some hidden state, because God can find us anywhere, but as Jesus pointed out, those who are “pure in heart”, truly honest with themselves, are on the fast-track to seeing God face-to-face: Peace to you. And to get true restorative peace, we must be honest with ourselves, just like Thomas was in this story.

While Jesus used the word “peace” or Shalom (conceptually) three times in John 20, most certainly making it a major textual theme, there is another word used more. “Believe” is used four times. There is an element of faith required to grow inwardly. If we want to be restored inside, we have to be honest with ourselves and believe that restoration is possible, that it’s not elusive, that wholeness can come out of brokenness. We may need to touch the scars in order to believe that the wounds aren’t bleeding anymore: Peace to you. We may need to grab the pierce mark and fall to our needs in gratitude that death has been reversed, and life abounds: Peace to you. But we know that true completeness, wholeness, restoration, contains within it an essential part: Justice. Peace on earth does not exist without justice.

On December 14, 1967, while standing outside a California jail where Vietnam protesters were being held, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “There can be no justice without peace and there can be no peace without justice”. The fact that Shalom and Justice, or dikaisune (Greek), are inextricably linked should not come as a surprise. Jesus said to “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt 6:33), but the word “righteousness” (dikanisune) is actually the same word as “justice” (it was a translator’s call when they translated it into English), so the verse could more easily be understood in this way, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you”. In other words, we need to get our priorities in alignment to the values of our faith. By seeking God’s kingdom and God’s justice, we in effect create peace—shalom—tikkun olam—the restoring of the most broken systems and righting the most egregious injustices in our communities. And it begins with us. Are we pure in heart? Do we walk in God’s peace? Do we understand the far-reaching nature of this deep peace? Are we living out Shalom in the world? Are we carrying out the message of “Peace to you”?

In Acts chapter 4 we get one of the clearest, rawest views into the first church. There was no manual on how to be a peace-community like Jesus had demonstrated, except through Jesus’ own examples and that of the prophets. How to care for the “least of these”—to make sure no one was left out, to give them refuge, to give them voice--the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. Jesus even expanded this to include all the poor, the “sinner” (or better yet the “imperfect”, the “tainted”, the “broken”), and also the mentally ill, and all marginalized peoples. “Love your neighbor as yourself”, he said, “on this hangs the whole law of the prophets”. So, the link between peace and justice is unshakable; they are bonded existentially. If we try to separate them, everything we do in the “name of peace” will fail. As we read in Acts 4, we see almost a return to our indigenous roots—like the native peoples of these lands—a self-determined choice to disempower us from our possessions—these things are not our own. This land is not mine, it is simply land. This cup is not my cup, it is simply a cup. Once we go through the process of disowning our “things”, we become free, personally liberated, but we also free up the resources to help those who need it most. Tony Campolo, the preacher and scholar, who just wrapped up the Red Letter

Revival at EC Glass this past weekend, kept returning to a subtle but heart-wrenching truth that Jesus shared, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:21). So, I say to all my friends here today. Peace to you. Peace both inside and out. May the just and restorative nature of God embody you and may your love extend beyond self and to all those who suffer around us. Peace to the world! Shalom and Wa alaykum a salaam.