

Peace Be With You!

Nearly every service, before we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we follow a practice that has been referred to as the “passing of the peace,” and it is introduced by the words, “The Peace of the Lord be always with you.”

From my perspective, this is not just a ritualistic parroted expression that I repeat simply because it is in the liturgy. It is a heartfelt appeal that each of you may indeed receive and be blessed by the peace that was extended by our Lord in the upper room after His resurrection.

It is expressed as both a desire and an invitation; a desire, because it is my passionate desire that each of us experience that peace in our lives on a daily basis; it is an invitation for those who have not experienced that peace to come, seek the Lord, and find that peace.

Most of us, having been brought up in the age of science, tend to think of things in logical, progressions. For example, if we see our pet dog or cat panting, and notice that their water bowl is empty, we automatically go get the bowl, take it over to the sink, put the bowl under the spigot, turn on the water, fill the bowl, turn the water off, and place the bowl in its normal place on the floor.

Of course we don't go through each step in our minds in this progression, we have become so accustomed to doing them that it comes naturally, but these are the steps we take, and it is usually in that order.

One wouldn't simply go over to the sink and turn the water on expecting our pet to go to the sink and lap up some water. And we wouldn't simply take the bowl to the sink and place it back on the floor without filling it.

This whole simple process is a learned process and it comes quite naturally, it is so natural that we do it without thinking about it.

Jesus teaches us that our receiving His peace is just as natural for those who wish to be His disciples as it is for those who wish to give their pets a refreshing drink of water.

Jesus tells Thomas, **Do not be unbelieving, but believing**” and in so doing, He admonishes each of us to do likewise, to be believing.

For us to appreciate the simplicity with which we can appropriate the Peace of our Lord, let's turn in our Bibles to John's Gospel Chapter 14, verse 18. You'll find that on page 570 of the pew Bible. Recall that this is a discourse that took place in the Upper Room after Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples and before His Crucifixion. What does Jesus tell His disciples in this verse? "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you."

And today, we see that Jesus has fulfilled His promise to return to all of His disciples;

AFTER His Crucifixion, and

AFTER His resurrection.

He has returned to those who, until His return, have felt as orphaned children, with no one watching over them, alone and distraught.

In that earlier discourse which we just read from Chapter 14, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

And today, we read when Jesus first came to the disciples when Thomas was not present that He came to them in the upper room, while the doors were locked, and His first words to them are: "Peace be with you."

Then again eight days later, again on Sunday, He comes to the disciples in the closed upper room, Thomas now being present, and the first words that He speaks to them are: "Peace to you!"

Are there any here who do not believe that Jesus wants us to be at peace, regardless of our circumstances?

How then can we each have that peace?

We can turn to Thomas, and learn from his example. Many scholars have written in their commentaries that the word translated as doubt is more appropriately translated unbelief. Most of you have heard me disclaim those commentaries that characterize Thomas as a doubter; Thomas did NOT doubt, instead He had unbelief.

I am convinced that our struggle with receiving the Peace that Jesus wants for all of us is not an issue of doubt, for all have expressed a belief in and an acceptance of Jesus as Lord. But we do tend to struggle with the same issue that plagued Thomas; unbelief, and our unbelief stems from a basic struggle of faith.

John's Gospel shows us that there are different kinds of faith, and that faith comes in different ways and with differing intensities to different people.

In Verse 8, the beloved disciple believes upon seeing the empty tomb;

- In Verse 16, Mary believes when the Lord calls her name.
- Then in verse 20, the disciples must see the risen Lord.
- And for Thomas, he says in verse 25 that he must touch Jesus' wounds -- though that need is foregone once Thomas sees and hears Jesus.

And while we are speaking of Thomas, let us not lose sight of the fact that Thomas believed, lost faith, and then returned to even greater faith.

Remember, it was Thomas who responded to Jesus insistence that He return to Jerusalem, **"Let us also go, that we may die with Him."** This was an obvious declaration of faith in Jesus as Messiah, for Thomas fully acknowledged Jesus as Lord, and knew in his heart that he would be safe with the Lord.

And go they did, yet, when Jesus was arrested and taken from the disciples, Thomas, along with the others, lost faith and fled. How could Jesus have been the Messiah and then be seized and crucified? NOT POSSIBLE!

Yet now, after having seen the risen Lord, and hearing Jesus speak to him, Thomas reaffirms his faith by saying to Jesus, **"My Lord and my God!"**

People have differing needs and find various routes to faith. I am reminded of a story told by Donner Atwood, Pastor of the Wyckoff Reformed Church from 1976-1985.

One night a house caught fire and a young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below with outstretched arms, calling to his son, "Jump! I'll catch you." He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see, however, was flame, smoke, and blackness. As can be imagined, he was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: "Jump! I will catch you." But the

boy protested, "Daddy, I can't see you." The father replied, "But I can see you and that's all that matters." The boy jumped, because he trusted his father.

Christian faith enables us to face life or meet death, not because we can see, but with the certainty that we are seen; not that we know all the answers, but that we are known.

It is a sad commentary on the faith of our country what we are learning from polls taken by such polling firms as the Barna Group. They have found that a significant majority of the country's faithful no longer hold closely to orthodox teachings, and look more to themselves than to churches or denominations to define their religious convictions.

Another fact that should shock us into action is the fact that more than half of all Christians believe that some non-Christians can get into heaven.

George Barna, president of Barna Group said, "Growing numbers of people now serve as their own theologian-in-residence."

In the Barna survey, 71 percent of American adults say they are more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs than to accept a defined set of teachings from a particular church. Even among born-again Christians, 61 percent pick and choose from the beliefs of different denominations. For people under the age of 25, the number rises to 82 percent.

These would be theologians who pick and choose what suites them are referred to as "cafeteria Christians." Many "cafeteria Christians" go beyond the teachings of Christian denominations to embrace parts of other world religions.

In the polls, Christians expressed a variety of unorthodox beliefs. Nearly half of those interviewed do not believe in the existence of Satan, one-third believe Jesus sinned while on earth, and two-fifths say they don't have a responsibility to share their faith with others.

Which brings us to the realization that with all of this confused, cafeteria-style thinking, it is no wonder that our society, as a whole, is seeking relief in alcohol, sex, drugs, money and ultimately suicide.

And if you think that the problem is imagined, check out these statistics:

- Approximately 76 million people grew up in a home where someone had a problem with alcohol or married someone with one.

- In 2006 the latest year for which statistics are available, 38.5 percent of all births were to unmarried females between the ages of 15 and 44.
- There were over 470,000 instances of reported abuse of such substances as cocaine, Heroin, Marijuana, Amphetamines, Methamphetamines, Ecstasy, etc., with Heroin leading the list at 44% of total reported incidents. And these are just the reported incidents, can you imagine, there are 130 incidents of substance abuse reported every day of the year?
- The most recent data for white collar crimes indicate that there are 5,428,613 offenses including Credit Card/ATM Fraud, Confidence games, welfare fraud, wire fraud, etc. That's 14,873 white collar crimes committed each day.
- There are an average of 83.9 suicides in the US every day of the year.

Is there any doubt in your mind that our country has lost its guiding light? As we have slipped farther and farther from the truths of scripture we slide deeper and deeper into the pit. It stands to reason that if there is nothing concrete to cling to, no absolute truths, no plumb line by which we can be guided, our human nature drives us to seek release through escapes, which ultimately lead to our own destruction.

This is the world in which we live. And while we can consider these statistics and believe them to be a sad indication of our society, there is an even greater sadness. Every one of these statistics could be eliminated if the people involved had been reached with the Gospel of our Lord, if each perpetrator had heard the Good News. If they had been brought into the light and received the peace that Jesus offers to those who follow him.

You see, we have the answer to those who may be driven to alcohol, sex, drugs, money, and suicide, the answer of course is Jesus. The problem in our country is that there are too few who take the Gospel into their worlds outside the church. There are too few who share the light of Christ in their relationships with others. There are too few who SOIF (Step Out In Faith).

John Bacon, a famous British sculptor, left this inscription on his tomb in Westminster Abbey: "What I was as an artist seemed of some importance to me while I lived; but what I was as a believer in Jesus Christ is the only thing of importance to me now."