

April 12, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Second Sunday in Easter
John 20:19-23
Acts 4:32-35

PASSING ON GOD'S PEACE

The disciples of Jesus have basically gone into hiding. This is the setting for today's reading from the Gospel of John. It is the night after the day that several of Jesus' women followers discovered the empty tomb. Jesus had been publically humiliated and executed as a troublesome teacher and prophet. He was perceived as threatening the well-being of the whole Jewish community. The Jewish leaders were struggling to maintain a fragile peace with the occupying Roman legions. But Jesus' magnetic presence and compelling teachings had gathered crowds and created public disturbances. He mingled with those on the margins, those considered to be unclean and impure in his culture. His proclamations on equality, distribution of wealth and acts of civil disobedience were troubling to those in power. The religious leaders decided Jesus needed to be stopped for the good of the whole and dragged him before the Roman executioners. Following the harrowing crucifixion scene, Jesus' disciples are now terrified that the authorities will come after them too. *They* have been seen teaching and healing in Jesus' name.

We are not exactly sure what is going on in the disciples' minds at this point. Perhaps they are hoping that if they can just stay hidden for a while maybe things will calm down. Can they slip out of Jerusalem and return to their fishing businesses and family life? But those troublesome women disciples have not been hiding. They went to the tomb, and they keep insisting Jesus is alive. But Jesus being alive would be a disturbing thought, for most of his followers have betrayed and abandoned him.

Then, all of a sudden, in the midst of a hasty evening meal and anxious conversation behind locked doors, Jesus is standing in the middle of the room. "Peace be with you," he announces. It is hard for us to imagine what this would have been like, all of a sudden seeing your dead teacher and leader standing before you, showing you his wounded hands and side. Shock, bewilderment, joy. The disciples must have felt a wild mix of emotions. Our 21st century minds may find the whole idea unscientific, illogical and even ridiculous. Yet over and over the New Testament writers make these reports of Jesus' appearances, which seemed to occur over a period of 50 days following Easter. And somehow, these encounters with the living presence of the Risen Jesus changes everything for his followers.

In all the appearances, as happens here, Jesus' followers don't recognize him at first. He's not a ghost, but not quite recognizably human either. Is it in

response to the obvious confusion and fear on their faces that Jesus says to them: “Peace be with you?” He shows them his wounds on his hands and side. These disciples may well have been hoping to never run into Jesus again, given their complicity in his death. It wasn’t just Judas who betrayed Jesus. His close friend Peter denied knowing him and most of the rest of them ran and hid. What are they expecting Jesus to say? “Thanks a lot, you guys. Way to be there for your friend.” But no, “Peace be with you....as the Father sent me, so I send you.” No condemnation here. Only affirmation. Only honoring and now commissioning....sending. John describes how Jesus “breathed on them,” saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

And it all starts with: “Peace be with you.” I am reminded of how we are invited to “pass the peace of Christ” each Sunday near the beginning of our worship service. The words sometimes seem awkward and it’s easy to lapse into a “Hi, how are you?” kind of salutation during this time. Folks end up chatting about church business or baseball scores or after-worship plans. I invite us to reconsider these words of Jesus: “Peace be with you.” What is the purpose of saying this? What are we trying to accomplish in those moments of greeting? Or, what might we be *extending* to one another if we were to look each other directly in the eye and say these words: “Peace be with you”?

To extend the peace of the Risen Jesus, the peace of Christ, is no casual thing, I believe. This is not just “being friendly.” “Peace be with you,” one person says; “And also with you,” the receiver responds. There is an old-fashioned formality to it that may feel strange. I don’t mean to suggest we should greet each other on Sundays with only these four words. Of course, other words might naturally follow. But, I am suggesting that the words themselves are a gift we give each other. I am inviting us to say try on these words and to ask ourselves: “What am I imagining, what am I hoping for, when I extend the peace of the Risen Lord, the peace of God, to another person?” Jesus challenged his disciples to forgive others and their sins would be forgiven; he warned them that if they retained the sins of any, they would be retained. Could there be some connection here between extending peace and acknowledging forgiveness? How might we live into this challenge more fully?

The early Christian communities quickly gained a reputation for some fairly radical lifestyle choices. We remember that they are living in a Middle Eastern world of first century Roman occupation. A stratified society of ruling elites, massive underclass, slavery. Military might, carefully engineered roads, magnificent architecture, economic power were all highly valued. But we just heard in the Book of Acts that the early followers of the Risen Jesus were known for their being of “one heart and soul,” for a remarkable sense of close community that broke down all kind of social and class barriers. They were also known for their sharing with one another and with those in need. “Everything they owned was held in common,” and “there was not a needy person among them.”

A remarkable generosity infused their dealings with one another. This was highly unusual in their time. Dan Clendenin, a contemporary Biblical scholar, writes on his blog "Journey with Jesus" that these two characteristics of *loving community and incredible generosity* account for the huge number of converts in Jerusalem. People wanted to join this "emergent Jesus-community" because it was so *different* from the rest of their culture.

It occurs to me that this is the standard for Christian community to which every church is held: Are we different from the rest of our predominant culture that values individual freedom, competition, power and material goods above all else? What does it look like to be so countercultural as a congregation that we become known for our "loving community and incredible generosity"?

"Peace be with you," we say to one another. Perhaps that is where we start. We don't really know, on any given Sunday, what a person brings with them to worship. We don't really know the full extent of the worries or fears, the sadness or anxiety. We can barely imagine the difficult memories or painful resentments, or the depth of their material need, or even the stultifying boredom, that lies on the hearts of our fellow worshippers. Each of us, at one time or another, comes to worship "locked" in something, just like the disciples who were locked behind closed doors. A newcomer may be in our midst, here for reasons we don't really know or may not understand. A longtime member could be sitting next to you filled with all kinds of unpeaceful feelings or thoughts, with emotional and spiritual needs that we can't comprehend. "Peace be with you," we say to stranger and close friend alike. A spirit of love and forgiveness is here. "*Community and generosity* is here for you, as it is for me," we signal one another.

We are not here on Sunday mornings to be entertained or to have our own private spiritual experience. There is plenty of religious entertainment on television and the Internet. The woods, streams and lakes all around us are a good place to commune with God in uninterrupted private. Church attendance is no longer a way to gain social status in most communities in this country. And there are easier and more comfortable ways to visit with your friends than to sit through an hour of worship in a pew!

We come to communal worship because we want a transformative experience of the living God, *among other people*. We want *in* on this radical kind of community where social and class barriers might dissolve and we grow together in forgiveness, as "one heart and soul." We want to be part of a generous congregation which makes lunches for a local homeless shelter, paints and pounds nails together building low-cost housing, collects canned stew to restock empty food pantry shelves, sends disaster relief to all parts of the world. We are here because we long to connect with the God whose peace draws us into community and generosity.

What a gracious and hopeful thing to say to one another in our worship time: “Peace be with you.” Simple words, but they are Jesus’ words. “Peace be with you,” Jesus repeated a second time to the startled disciples. “As God has sent me, so I send you.” And so we are offered God’s peace; and so we are sent. Amen.

Note:

The “generosity and community” reference describing the early Christian community, as reported in the Book of Acts, comes from Dan McClendenin (*Journey with Jesus* website).

The writings of Rowan Williams, former Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, have influenced my understanding of the disciples’ reactions to Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances (*Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*).