

SERMON TITLE: "Seek Peace Within"

TEXT: John 14:25-27; 16:25-33

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Near the end of June I sat down to map out our summer sermon series on seeking and pursuing peace.

There was a lot of good material about the many important realms in which we are called to pursue peace, as well as the many different aspects of what pursuing peace in our world and in our relationships actually looks like (we have covered these throughout the summer).

But there was one omission that I thought was rather striking.

What about *inner* peace?

This, too, is an area where we long for peace.

Yet it seems to me that this is the very peace that so often seems to elude our grasp, whether in our broader culture or in the church.

Scarcely a day goes by when our newspapers do not contain some version or other of the story that our lives as modern citizens are characterized by chronic stress and anxiety, by worry, by restlessness and the terminal distraction made easy by the internet, by addictions of all kinds and depression.

Just this week, I came across no fewer than a dozen articles that dealt with everything from dealing with stress and anxiety at the workplace to wondering why those with more money don't seem happier¹ to analyzing which regions of the world have the highest rates of depression to advocating meditation and breathing exercises for children who are overcome by stress over upcoming exams.²

One article from Slate magazine offered this diagnosis of the American situation (I don't think things are very different in Canada):

¹ <http://life.nationalpost.com/2012/08/14/happiness-its-both-a-long-and-short-game-no-matter-the-price-of-admission/>

² <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/parenting/relax-kids-meditation-touted-as-stress-buster-for-children/article4250936/>

Over the last several decades, both through good economic times and bad, the United States has transformed into the planet's undisputed worry champion. Around the turn of the millennium, anxiety flew past depression as the most prominent mental health issue in America, and it's never looked back: With more than 18 percent of adults suffering from an anxiety disorder in any given year, the United States is now the most anxious nation in the world, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Stress-related ailments cost the nation \$300 billion every year in medical bills and lost productivity, while our usage of sedative drugs keeps skyrocketing; just between 1997 and 2004, Americans more than doubled their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion. And this anxious strain hits us well before we reach college. As psychologist Robert Leahy points out: "The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s."³

That's quite a diagnosis of our predicament! This doesn't describe everyone, but the numbers are alarming.

What are we so afraid and stressed and anxious *about*?

It seems to me that it comes from at least four domains:

- Our material circumstances
 - o Do we have enough? Are we safe, secure? Do we have the right job? Did we make the right decisions?
- Relationally
 - o Is our marriage good enough? Are our kids well-adjusted, well-behaved? What about our relationships with other members of our family, with friends, co-workers, etc?
- Mentally/emotionally
 - o Do we like ourselves? Can we cope with the demands of life? Are we going to make it?
- Spiritually/existentially
 - o What about all of those other religions? How do we know we are on the right path? Can we know the meaning of life?
 - o Is salvation really possible?

Our lack of inner peace has many sources indeed.

Two thousand years ago, in a time and place before Xanax or Valium, long before the language of addiction and personality disorders and chronic stress, a young Jewish rabbi sat down with a handful of his followers for one last conversation before what he knew would be his final night with them.

³ http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/01/its_not_the_job_market.html

Theirs were stressful times.

The Roman Empire restricted controlled their freedom and dominated nearly every element of daily life. It was a brutal regime that was maintained by violence and fear.

The Jewish religious system was equally oppressive and contentious, with leaders pressing heavy demands upon people, and crippling them with endless interpretations and swift enforcement of the law.

Jesus and his followers had been harassed, misunderstood, threatened at nearly every turn.

And Jesus himself was an enigma. He spoke such strange and bracing words about giving up everything to follow him, leaving family and friends, taking up their cross, counting the cost, being prepared to die for him, etc.

Amazing things had happened through this Jesus. The disciples had witnessed miraculous signs and wonders, healings and feedings, the raising of the dead! They had seen him challenge the religious authorities with authority and power. They had witnessed Jesus' example of sacrificial love and pondered his teachings on forgiveness and the inbreaking kingdom of God.

But he also spoke about dying a lot, about laying down his life for his sheep, about how he would be betrayed by those closest to him. He wasn't easy to figure out, this Jesus.

These were turbulent times, stressful times.

And now they are together, one last time—the calm before the coming storm.

And then Jesus sits down for one last long conversation with his disciples.

Those of you who are parents will probably know about the importance of last words. We often call out one last set of instructions before our kids go off to school or on a trip.

Often these are important things that we want them to remember:

- "Don't forget to call home!"
- "Don't forget to listen to your teachers!"
- "Don't forget to brush your teeth/shower at camp!"
- "Don't forget your passport, your wallet, your phone!"
- "I love you!"
- "I will be praying for you!"

We want our last words to be the words that stay with our children as they go.

Chapters 14-17 of the Gospel of John, where our texts today are taken from, are referred to as Jesus' "farewell discourse." These are his last words before leaving—the words he wants ringing in their ears once he is no longer with him.

Jesus does a number of things in these four chapters. He talks about the importance of love and unity, he promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit—the Advocate, the comforter—will come to them and lead them into all truth.

He prays for them—chapter 17 is the longest prayer of Jesus' in the Bible. He asks the Father for protection and for purity and for truth, both for his disciples and for all who will come after them (i.e., us!).

He also talks a lot about peace. In our first reading, Jesus says these words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

No matter what comes next for you, no matter what you face, I give you peace.

"I do not give to you as the world gives."

Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Somehow, the peace Jesus is offering is different than alternative versions of peace. It is deeper, truer, and stronger. It has the capacity to guide and protect our souls through whatever life throws our way.

In our second reading, Jesus bases the gift of peace on the love of the Father and the connection between the Father and the Son—the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (v. 27-28).

This promise of peace comes along with a promise of hardship: "The hour is coming when you will be scattered, each one to his own home, and you will leave me alone."

Jesus also knows what lies ahead for his disciples—persecution, hardship, poverty, misunderstanding, and, for some, martyrdom.

Jesus is well aware of just how volatile and turbulent the times are and will be for himself and for his followers.

And yet, he says these words:

³³ *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

In me, you may have peace. Just a chapter earlier Jesus spoke his famous words about the vine and the branches—about how the key to bearing fruit is remaining in Jesus, obeying his commandments, and in so doing, resting in the love of God.

Inner peace is possible, if we remain in the one who promises peace, the one who made peace through his life, death, and resurrection.

This is what Jesus wants his disciples to remember after he is gone.

So, is this last conversation just another set of instructions?

In addition to seeking and pursuing peace in all kinds of other realms and ways, and on top of all the burdens and stresses of modern life, is Jesus now giving us one more thing to do on top of it all?

In addition to struggling to stay afloat in the stormy seas of life, are we supposed to attain inner peace in the midst all of this as well?

Well, yes.

And no.

First, the yes. Yes, inner peace is possible—even in our stormy times. As we have seen, Jesus' words were delivered in a context and circumstances at least as stressful as our own, probably more.

Clearly, peace can coexist with difficult circumstances.

Jesus is not saying that the peace he offers will magically transform every unpleasant feature of our lives.

Inner peace cannot be dependent upon circumstances because our circumstances will never be just as we want them.

We will never have the perfect job that is wonderfully fulfilling one hundred percent of the time.

We will never make perfect decisions about where to live and what vocation to choose, how we will spend our time, what we will purchase, etc.

We will never have a perfect marriage where we always say and do the right things, where we never frustrate or step on each other's toes.

We will never be perfect parents or sons or daughters or brothers or sisters or friends.

We will never worship in a perfect church where the theology is exactly right, where the music is just as we like it, and where the people are all wonderfully kind and well adjusted and thoughtful and ready to do anything and everything to meet our needs.

We will never arrive at that wonderfully holistic and perfectly balanced self-image where we perfectly avoid the twin dangers of thinking too much or too little of ourselves.

We will never be perfectly safe and free from physical harm.

We will never know as much as we would like to know about God and evil and suffering and other religions and the nature of the afterlife and the meaning of it all.

In this world you will have trouble. Not *might* have trouble. *Will* have trouble. But take heart—peace is possible even in the midst of all of this, because **I have overcome the world!**

These words bring us all the way back to the first chapter of John where John says:

In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Now, the no.

No, we are not expected to *attain* peace. Peace is not a state of affairs we are expected to achieve; rather, it is a gift of God that is given to us.

What does Jesus say? Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.

Not, here are a set of techniques and principles by which you can actualize the peace that I have demonstrated for you.

Simply, peace I leave... I give. All you have to “do” is remain in me.

Trust me.

A bit earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus says these famous words: “I will not leave you as orphans. I am coming to you.”

To be an orphan is, I think, to feel alone and to feel homeless and to feel like there is nowhere to turn for help, for comfort, for belonging, and no stable future to hope for.

This is exactly how many people feel in our world.

But Jesus promises that we are not alone, that he is always coming to us, and lives in and through us, and that we are not orphans!

During most of the sermons I preach, I am very aware of the gap between the realities that I am talking about and my own life and my own experience. This is one of the burdens of preaching, I suppose—we are always pointing beyond our present experience.

As I was preparing the sermon this week, I was even more acutely aware of this. In talking about inner peace and about the peace Jesus offers, I wish I could say that I know what it is to have uninterrupted experience of this. But I can't.

I need these reminders as much as, if not more than, anyone else.

I need to be reminded that the peace of Christ does not depend on a generally favourable set of life circumstances.

I need to be reminded of the importance of abiding in Christ as the condition for peace.

And I need to be reminded that the fundamental reality that stands behind any hope for peace in our conflicted times and in our conflicted minds and hearts, is trust.

If we do not trust that Jesus is telling us the truth about who God is, about the love God has for us—regardless of how well we happen to be “performing!”—and about the possibility of a deep and settled peace no matter what life throws at us... **If we do not believe that God is trustworthy in his promises and that God's future is secure, then inner peace will be impossible.**

If we cannot trust, we will be forever adrift on the seas of changing circumstances, we will be forever restless and anxious, and scrambling to secure our future for ourselves.

The prominent early church theologian St. Augustine said these famous words in his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,”

This rest requires a trust that behind every circumstance in our lives, God is at work and that we can thus be free from the restless anxiety and striving that is so typical of modern life.

A final quote from Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge*:

A rich self has a distinct attitude towards the past, the present, and the future. It surveys the **past** with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given. A rich self lives in the **present** with contentment. Rather than never having enough of anything except for the burdens others place on it, it is "always having enough of everything" (2 Corinthians 9:8). It still strives, but it strives out of a satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving. A rich self looks toward the **future** with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. Finite and endangered, a rich self still gives, because its life is "hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

Seek peace and pursue it. This is what we have been talking about all summer. But the words "seek" and "pursue" are busy words.

Perhaps what we need to hear today, as summer draws to a close, as the busyness of fall looms large on many of our horizons, as we wonder if we will be up to the many challenges that will face us over the next year, is:

Receive peace, and rest in it.

Do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled. I have overcome the world with all of its manic striving and misplaced loves and loyalties.

I love you. And I leave you peace.

Trust me.

Thanks be to God.