

May 28, 2023

The Day of Pentecost

Texts: John 14:23-31; Acts 2:1-21

When you picture the scene depicted in our reading from Acts 2 – the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – what do you imagine? With the sound of a great rushing wind, and tongues as of fire descending onto the disciples, and then the spontaneous proclamation of the Gospel in languages from around the Mediterranean world, how would you describe it? Energetic? Exciting? Maybe even a little chaotic?

Would you describe it, though, as peaceful? I'm guessing that's probably not the first word that would come to your mind – peaceful. Yet as Jesus foretells the coming of the Holy Spirit in our Gospel text, He connects that event with peace.

Clearly, the word “peace” is one of those words which the Bible uses in a way that is sometimes different from how we often use the word in our day. So today, we'll consider the difference between the two, between the peace which the world gives and the peace which Jesus gives.

So again, when we think of that first Pentecost in the New Testament Church, “peaceful” probably isn't what we think of. What would we describe as “peaceful,” then?

Something calm perhaps? A day when nothing major is going on that you have to worry about? Perhaps “peace” in this sense is the absence of conflict – no one is upset with you. These seem to get at the gist of the peace in the worldly sense.

And this sort of peace, it's not all bad. It certainly is a good thing to have periods of calm and rest in our lives. We rightly desire peace at our jobs, peace in our families, peace in our communities. We are told in the Bible to pray for peace in our land, that we may lead quiet and peaceful lives. So this worldly peace is very often a blessing, and we should give thanks to God for those times when He gives it to us.

The problem comes when we seek this peace not from God but from the world. Peace is a gift from God, but like every other worldly gift God gives to us, it can become an idol. We are tempted to put this worldly peace above God, to value having it more than having God and His Word of Truth.

Any time we seek this peace from the world instead of waiting for it from God, the world will demand a price from us. It will ask us to give something in return, and because this world and its ruler are opposed to God, it will ask us to give up the things of God.

You can have peace with your neighbors, just never talk about Jesus or His Word with them. You'll get along fine.

You can have peace with society, just fly the appropriate flags outside your house or put the right bumper sticker on your car or list your pronouns in your email signature. No one will bother you.

You can have peace with your family, just be sure to never confront them about sinful behavior or remind them of what they vowed to God at their confirmation or at a Baptism they were in or in their wedding vows. Thanksgiving dinner will be a lot more pleasant that way.

To gain peace in this world, you'll be asked to take God's Word out of it. Again, worldly peace is a desirable thing, a good thing. But when you must give up God's Word to get it, when you must

remain silent in those times where the Holy Spirit grants an opportunity to speak it, then worldly peace has gone from being a good thing to being an idol, a false god.

Now you might be thinking, “But doesn’t Jesus want us to have peace? Didn’t He say, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’? Jesus wouldn’t lead us into conflict, would He?”

Jesus did in fact say, “Blessed are the peacemakers;” that’s one of the Beatitudes. But Jesus isn’t endorsing pursuing worldly peace at all costs, especially idolatry.

He said in that same Sermon on the Mount, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.” He also said elsewhere in the Gospels, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Again, not peace, but a sword – division.

Now how can this be? Wasn’t it at His birth that the angels sang, “Peace on earth; good will toward men”? Again, true. But the angels aren’t speaking of worldly peace. Their song is of something much greater. As Jesus said, “My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.”

The peace that Jesus came to give, and which He still gives, is a peace much greater than worldly peace, and it is much greater in several regards. First and foremost, the peace Jesus gives is an objective reality. Worldly peace is usually just a feeling. You “feel” at peace. It “seems” peaceful. But feelings change. They can deceive. But the peace Jesus gives is an actual change, an actual reality. The peace He gives is peace between God and man.

All conflict, all trouble, all lack of peace ultimately has its source in sin, in man’s rebellion against God. It manifests itself in many different ways, such as physical suffering, emotional distress, strife in relationships, and finally death itself, but the root of the problem is always the same: our pushing away the God of peace through sin.

When we pursue the world’s offers for peace, we do nothing to address the source of the problem. We are just putting a band-aid on the wound without cleaning it first, just plastering over the cracks in the walls without stabilizing the foundation.

The symptom is treated without curing the underlying condition, and so many times this superficial treatment just makes the problem worse. A little peace now just creates bigger problems down the road.

But this is not how Jesus gives peace. Jesus has come and by His sacrifice on the cross wiped away the sin at the root. We all are joined in the rebellion against God started by Adam, but Jesus, the new Adam, has reconciled us to the Father, granting us peace with our Lord and Creator. Though we force God’s gaze away and shove away His hand by our sins, Jesus comes and atones for those sins, letting our Father look on us again and give us every good gift from His hand.

Through this peace and reconciliation with God, we can seek true peace and reconciliation with our neighbors in this life. We can truly turn the other cheek, endure suffering, and forgive others – all things that make for peace – because we bear the peace of God.

Not only does the peace which Jesus gives address the root of the problem, His peace is also a lasting peace. The peace the world gives is ever only temporary.

Because the root of the problem is still there, it's only a matter of time before another problem arises. The band-aid will fall off, and because the wound wasn't properly treated, now it's worse, it's bigger, it's going to need a bigger band-aid, which will cost you more.

You have to do more and more just to keep renewing the peace that eventually you're exhausted just from this continual effort. Constantly pursuing peace from the world ends up robbing you of peace.

But the peace Jesus won for us is an everlasting peace. When He said, "It is finished," then it was finished. He did everything necessary, and that great sacrifice never expires or wears out. You can reject it, and tragically many people do, but that doesn't mean that the blood of Jesus stopped working or was insufficient.

No, that blood and the blessings given through it endure forever. The forgiveness you have now is the forgiveness you will have into eternity. The new life you have now is the new life you will have into eternity. The peace with God you have now is the peace with God you will have into eternity.

You have this peace forever because Jesus doesn't give as the world gives. Remember, when the world offers peace, it always demands something in return. And because the world's peace is only temporary, the world will always be wanting more, and more, and more. This is how the world and its ruler, Satan, overtake so many people.

Our government didn't go from defending traditional marriage and family to flying the "Pride" flag at our embassies around the world overnight, or even in a single election cycle.

Many churches in our nation and around the world didn't go from staunchly defending the Bible and the teachings God gives us through it to denying its truth and even mocking parts of it in the space of one Sunday to the next.

Many former Christians didn't go to bed one night as firm believers in Christ and then woke up the next morning as woke, militant atheists.

These are all gradual processes, deceptively slow.

We the people gave ground little by little, almost always so that we could have "peace" with the various people in our country.

Churches surrender God's Word little by little so that they might be appealing and have peace, both with the outside world and within their own institutions and councils and voters assemblies.

Many former Christians and those currently straying from the faith are helped down that path by Christians who, for the sake of outward peace, gave in in little ways, but did so over and over again. The world offers peace for a time, but the price it demands is an eternally significant one.

Jesus, on the other hand, gives peace freely, as a gift. He doesn't demand anything from you in exchange for this wonderful gift.

And besides, what do we have that we could even give in return? All we have belongs to Him in the first place. And before conversion, all our works and words and even thoughts are corrupted by sin, making them unclean and therefore unworthy of being offered as a sacrifice to Him.

Jesus knows this, that we have nothing to offer Him, and so He offers Himself for us and to us. He shed His blood on the cross for all men, not just those “good enough,” and He sends His Spirit to grant repentance and faith to those who are mired in sin and even who are His enemies.

As we heard last week in Ezekiel, it is the Lord who puts His Spirit in us and who causes us to keep His ways, who takes our old, stony, corrupted hearts and gives us new hearts that love and trust in Him.

That trust, that faith, is what clings to the Words of Jesus and by this grants us peace. By faith in His Word, we know that Jesus has wiped away all our sins – every single one of them.

By faith in His Word, we know that God has brought us into His family and so the Almighty Lord is our loving Father.

By faith in His Word, we know that He will turn all things to good for the sake of His Son, even our suffering, even our deaths.

By faith in His Word, we know that our Lord Christ is ruling and reigning over all things and doing so for the sake of His beloved bride, the Church.

By faith in His Word, we know that, though we die, yet shall we live, and that we who live and believe in Him will never truly die.

By faith in His Word, we know that, though He has gone away, yet He comes back to us, both in His holy Supper and again in glory at the Last Day.

Because it is the Lord who does all this – not us frail, fallible humans, but the perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God – because He does all this for us, we have peace.

Jesus doesn't just say this all and leave it at just words, either. He shows us what it is to have this peace. As He tells all this to His disciples that night in the upper room, He says, “I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming.”

Picture that. Imagine if I said, “Okay, we'll have to cut our service short this morning because the devil is coming for us.” Might that make you a little nervous, a little uneasy?

Yet Jesus continues: “He (the devil) has no claim on me.” Yes, Satan is coming, but he's got no authority over Jesus. And this isn't just because Jesus is God, but rather that Jesus is entrusting Himself completely to the will of His Father.

He continues, “but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” Jesus is obeying His Father, trusting His Father, loving His Father. He knows that His Father will preserve Him according to all the promises given in Scripture.

Will it be unpleasant when the ruler of this world comes? Yes. Will Jesus suffer as He obeys His Father? Yes! But will the Father keep His promises, that the grave shall not hold His Holy One, that He shall raise Him on the third day? Absolutely yes! And so Jesus, even headed to the cross, has peace.

That peace, grounded in God's faithfulness, is still given to His Church. On that Pentecost Day two millennia ago, the Father, in the Son's name, sent the Spirit. God would still dwell with His people, still give them His peace.

Does that mean that they would have worldly peace? Far from it! Of those present that day, many would be imprisoned, many would be tortured, many would be taken from their friends and family. Many would eventually be put to death of the sake of Christ and His holy name. But you know what? In all that, they still had the peace given by Jesus.

They had peace as they were imprisoned, because they had been set from the chains of sin and death.

They had peace as they suffered persecution, because Jesus had told them that theirs was the Kingdom of Heaven.

They had peace in isolation, as their Lord had promised to be with them always, even to the end of the age.

And when their blood was shed and their lives ended as holy martyrs, they had peace, for at that very moment, their Lord sent His angels to bring them to His side.

Still today, Jesus sends us His Church peace. Still today, the Spirit goes throughout the world, calling people to faith through the Gospel and enlightening them with His gifts.

Does the Church still suffer? Yes. Will you still suffer? Yes.

You are still in your sinful flesh, feeling its effects and struggling against it. You are still in a world opposed to the Lord and ruled over by the chief of demons.

But the blood of Jesus still covers you. The promises of Jesus are still true for you. The Spirit sent by Jesus still dwells in you. No matter what you face, you can say as we did in our hymn, "It is well with my soul," because you belong to Jesus, and He is the Lord of all who will allow nothing to take His people out of His hand.

Even when the ruler of this world and all the various agents he uses come for you, remember, they have no claim on you. Christ has purchased you, won you, redeemed you. Christ has given you His peace, and no one can take that peace from you.

In the name of Jesus, amen.