

Pax – The Passing of the Peace

by Penn Hagood, Jr. Warden

As many of you know, I came home from our inspiring pilgrimage to the Holy Land to the news that my beloved husband, Ben, who has fought a courageous battle for seven years against the blood cancer Multiple Myeloma, had now been diagnosed with a second blood cancer, Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. As we each plunged into another dark night of the soul, we have been reflecting on various scripture lessons and signs from God.

This past Sunday, during the service at St. Philip's, one aspect of the liturgy leapt off the pages of the Prayer Book. Following an inspiring sermon, the recitation of the Nicene Creed, the Prayers of the People, our Confession of Sin and the pastor's Absolution and Comforting Words, the liturgy came to the Peace. The words "The Peace of the Lord be always with you" struck home quite powerfully. It was what my heart was craving.

In the early and Medieval Church, the Peace was a real symbol, a physical object. It was either a round, flat disc or some other small object with a flat surface made out of wood, bronze, brass or even gold. It was often decorated with an image of the crucifixion on it. It was known as the Pax.

During the liturgy, the priest would raise the Pax and kiss it with the Holy Kiss, also known as the Kiss of Peace. He would then pass the Pax to his associate, saying to him, "the Peace of God" or "the Peace of God be with you." This man, in turn, would then pass the Pax to the first person in the congregation repeating the verbal offering of the Peace of God. This person would then pass it to his neighbor and so on until the Pax had been passed neighbor to neighbor throughout the entire congregation. As the Pax was passed, each person addressed their neighbor and offered the Peace of God to them.

As Jesus commanded us in Mark 12:29-31, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet sometimes we struggle with just how to do that.

During the dark moments in each of our lives, what we truly long for is the Peace of God which passes all understanding. Every one of us, in one way or another, is struggling with some challenge. It may be illness or disease as our family is right now; it may be with relationships; it may be with work or finances or family or children or parents. Challenges come to each of us from myriad sources.

Whether we are walking under the shadow of death or weaving and dodging rocks that pop up in our path, God has promised that we are never alone. He is with us. What a joyful opportunity we have each Sunday to remind each other of that central truth as we offer God's Peace to each other.

As Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28, for those who love the Lord, all things work together for good. On Sunday mornings, as we move past our own selves, our own problems and our own desires and turn our attention to God, seeking to give Him glory through worship, we have a chance to model the commandments of Jesus. Through the structure and design of our Sunday service, as we immerse ourselves in scripture, song, prayer and praise, we glorify God by worshiping Him with the fullness of our hearts, souls, minds and bodies. In this way, we move toward fulfilling the first part of what Jesus commands us to do.

In the center of that glorious worship, nestled into the midst of the service, we are given an amazing opportunity, to fulfill the second part of Jesus' commandment as we love and serve our neighbor by turning to them, and, in full agape love, offering them the Peace of God which passes all understanding. What a supreme way of truly loving our neighbors

as ourselves as we offer each other the gift of God's Peace and the hope that it may dwell in our hearts in the midst of whatever struggles each of us is facing.

Sometimes in the face of hardship and grief, it can be difficult to know the right words to say to offer comfort to one another. Other times, we may not know what trials those beside us are silently suffering. Yet subtly woven into our liturgy is the glorious gift to each of us of the opportunity to minister to each other by offering exactly what every aching soul needs, the Peace of God. What a simple yet truly marvelous opportunity for us, in just a moment of time, to live into the fullness of Jesus' commandments to us.

In the Sundays to come, I will eagerly look forward to sharing the Peace of God with you. Soli Deo Gloria - to God alone be the glory!

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