

Care of the Soul: Finding Peace

Matthew 11:28-30

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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Ninety-three years ago yesterday, in the segregated southern city of Atlanta, Georgia, the associate pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and his wife welcomed a baby boy into the world. They named him Martin after his father, and, like his father, he would someday become a powerful voice from the pulpit. But, of course, his words rang out far beyond Atlanta as Martin Luther King Jr. became one of the greatest advocates for civil rights, for peace, and for justice that the world has known.

So, this weekend in the United States, we collectively remember Dr. King, celebrate his legacy, and continue to educate and advocate for his vision of a beloved community - a world in which all people, regardless of skin color or any other mark of humanity, would live freely in a just and peaceful society.

King not only became the most powerful voice in the Civil Rights Movement, he also spoke out against the Vietnam War and led a campaign against poverty. Today, some 58 years later, we are still struggling with many of the same issues Dr. King strove so hard to overcome. Racism, poverty, and violence still play out in the life of our country every day. Plus, now we are almost two years into the global pandemic. While we are inspired by Dr. King's vision, months and months of disconnection, fear, uncertainty, loneliness, death, illness, pivoting, waiting, risk assessment, depression, and decision-making have left us with little energy to care for the great challenges of our world. How can we pick up the work of creating a peaceful society when our own spirits are worn, weary, and anxious?

This is the third in our sermon series entitled "Care of the Soul" in which we're looking at how to care for ourselves spiritually and emotionally after two years of global pandemic and social upheaval. The first week, Rev. Shonagh helped us to ground ourselves in the assurance that we are made in the image of God. Then, last week, our lay speaker, Carole DeHart, spoke about forgiving ourselves. Today, I'd like to explore how we might find peace, real peace, even in the most trying of times.

There are many things, of course that interfere with a sense of inner peace - not just Covid. There are all the things we worry about - not just the state of the world, but our children, parents, jobs, future, whatever feels out of our control. And there are the feelings of being overwhelmed - so much to do, so many risks to manage, so many decisions to make. And then, of course, there is the looming past - whatever feelings of guilt or shame we have been carrying with us for decades. All of these keep us in this place of fear - and fear is the enemy of peace.

When we think back on Dr. King and the thousands who marched with him, they had every reason to be afraid and to be weary. Yet, they carried on, and many would say they did so by leaning on Jesus. Jesus says to us, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." They are among the most comforting words Jesus speaks in the Gospels, an invitation to

all who struggle under the circumstances and challenges of their lives to find peace and renewal in him.

When he says this, Jesus is addressing those who are weary from trying to not only survive as subjects of the Roman Empire but also meet the demands of the Law as interpreted by the scribes and pharisees. Yet, the New Interpreter's Bible says, "But we cannot limit the application (of this text). The priests took whatever the Roman taxes left; but the real burden, in every land and time, is the burden of anxious fear...Christ sets no limits around that blessed **all**. The sad in heart are included, and all who bend beneath time's load".

So, it seems, Christ is inviting us, too. Calling to us to come to him and let go of all the fear and worry and exhaustion we have accumulated over these two years so we can rest, really rest. In John 14, while sharing his last words of wisdom before he is arrested and taken away, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid".

Yet, what does that mean? What are we talking about when we speak of the peace of Christ? And how is it different from what the world gives? Many of us find some degree of peace from worldly accomplishments - from the assurance of having enough money, a roof over our heads, a good job. We find a sense of peace when everything is going right - the house is clean, the bills are paid, the kids are doing well in school. Yet, as we know, as we've learned, that peace is fleeting. We have no assurance that what brings us peace today, the peace the world gives, will be there tomorrow.

The peace of Christ, however, is constant - always available to us because it is anchored not in any material or external thing but in God or, perhaps easier to comprehend, it is anchored in love. The peace of Christ is found in his commandment, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself". Love self, love God, love neighbor.

So, how do we find that peace? What does it look like to love ourselves, our God, and our neighbor right now, this moment, in a 21st century pandemic? As both Shonagh and Carole have pointed out, much of the work begins by looking within. There are two ways to think about it.

The first is to consider what we need to let go of to be more loving. What burdens can we lay down? In an article published recently on the Inc. website, author and social worker, Amy Morin, identifies "ten things that mentally strong people give up to gain inner peace". Though written for a secular audience, I think we can see many of these reflected in the example and teachings of Jesus. Among the things to give up that she mentions are 1) Trying to change toxic people. Remember that Jesus didn't focus on changing the Pharisees but on caring for those on the margins of society. Secondly, staying comfortable. Jesus could easily have stayed a carpenter and spent his entire life in Nazareth. Yet, he knew that for him to live out God's calling on his life, he would have to get out of his comfort zone.

Another thing to let go of is a victim mentality. There is always someone else to blame, yet we can't be at peace within ourselves if we don't accept the responsibility for our actions. Another is to give up our grudges. What does Jesus say on the cross but, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." And finally, complete self-reliance. We cannot weather the

storms of life, particularly this one, alone. We need God. We need each other. We take the yoke to help each other carry the heavy load.

So, letting go is one approach to finding peace. There is another way, though - to actively seek peace by intentionally doing things that bring you closer to God, to the source of life, the giver of unconditional love. For example, you might take a walk in the woods, sit by a river or a lake, bird-watch, or watch a sunrise or sunset. Allow the cycles of nature which occur so predictably to assure you that God has created life to continuously renew and nurture itself. There is a force at work in nature much greater than ourselves and that force continues regardless of the challenges of life. That same force reminds us, too, that we are all interconnected. To quote Dr. King, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Find assurance in the knowledge that you are not alone.

Alternatively, consider some kind of practice that focuses on your breath. That may be meditation or mindfulness or yoga, all of which draw your attention to sacred rhythms of breathing. God created life by blowing God's breath into Adam. God continues to be present to us in the air we breathe.

You might also try doing something creative. Allow your creative self to reach out to God the Creator. Sing, paint, dance, write, throw pots, draw, play an instrument, do needlework, take photographs. Every creative act is a moment in which we pay attention to the beauty of the world around us and connect to the image of God within ourselves.

Practice self-compassion. Pay attention to the running commentary in your mind. Do you speak to yourself the way you would to a friend or are you judgmental or critical of yourself? Write a mantra or prayer to say when you catch yourself speaking unkindly to yourself or feeling anxious or afraid. For years I have recited a simple prayer from Thich Nhat Hahn - including when I was in labor. "Breathing in I calm my body, breathing out, I smile. Living in this present moment, I know it is a beautiful moment."

Speaking of which, find ways of staying in the moment - not worrying about the future, not rehashing or regretting the past. Simply taking in the gift of life that God has given to you.

Ask yourself multiple times a day, "What am I grateful for?" and take a moment to say a prayer of thanks. We know that gratitude has great power to center us, calm us, and bring us to a place of peace.

Finally, make a point of doing something kind for someone else. It doesn't have to be a big thing. Enjoy the sense of connection when you smile at someone on the street and they smile back, when you offer your seat to someone or stop to pick up something another shopper dropped in the grocery store. Make a point of thanking or complimenting someone. These are such small acts, but they strengthen that network of mutuality Dr. King spoke of.

We know now that like all of the societal ills that Dr. King worked to change, Covid 19 is not going away. We know, too, that the upheaval it causes can lead us to great hurt and weariness. May we enter the third year of Covid seeking the peace of Christ within that, with the strength and calm he gives us, we can make peace in the world. Amen.