

Sermon on John 14:23-29  
Sixth Sunday after Easter, May 9, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

The gospel today begins with Jesus' answer to a question asked by one of his disciples, Judas (not Iscariot – a different Judas!) at the Last Supper. If you're like me, you are perhaps wondering what the question actually was! (The lectionary didn't bother to include it in our passage read today!) At this final gathering before his betrayal, arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus had just told his disciples that he would soon be leaving them – but not to be troubled by this, as he would go ahead of them to prepare a place for them. And he would come again and take them to himself. In the meantime, he would not leave his followers “orphaned” and alone. In a little while the world would no longer see him, but those who loved him would see him. He said, “I will love them and reveal myself to them.” And so here is the question that Judas (not Iscariot) asked: “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”

Jesus' answer? *“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”* Well, perhaps the disciples were thinking, we're glad to hear of your confidence in us, and that God has such love for us, but that doesn't really answer the question! How will you reveal yourself to us, even when the rest of the world cannot see? How will we know you are here and feel your presence among us? How will you help us to understand this mystery?

So here is the real answer to the question of “how”: Jesus said, *“the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. [So] do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”*

So after all this unsettling news that he was about to leave them, and then that they would somehow know of his presence when he returned, by this new, mysterious force called “the Holy Spirit”, Jesus thought they should not “be troubled?!” Is there a word in Hebrew or Greek for our modern English phrase, “Gimme a break?!” Little did the disciples know at the time what trials were ahead of them, with Jesus' coming betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, the coming resurrection, and a lifetime of their witness as apostolic witnesses who would go from town to town, country to country with the good news of Jesus' rising from the dead, and the trials and persecutions that would come their way because of it. Just don't let your hearts be troubled? Sounds like some line from a movie, when the

hero is going into action against impossible odds, and says “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about this, you’ll be just fine!”

Well, how do YOU feel about this advice from our Lord, when you think about the world around us and the challenges you and I face today. Our national economy is just starting to come around from a year of recession, mortgage foreclosures, and losses of jobs, and now we’re faced with an enormous oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico, our nation is bitterly divided by immigration legislation passed in Arizona, and even churches are divided over interpretation of scripture and who we should welcome in our churches and include or exclude from leadership. There just seems to be a whole lot of troubling stuff going on today in our world – there always is, I guess, so for Jesus to say “don’t let your hearts be troubled” doesn’t seem to cut it! With everything going on it would seem insane NOT to be worried. Anxiety and fear seem to be just the right reaction for us humans!

So we had better listen to Jesus’ words a little more closely, and examine why and how Jesus says we shouldn’t be so anxious. Listen to what he says: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you – I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”* Jesus encourages us to live with faith, and not with fear, because he is giving us the gift of peace, literally *shalom*, which means “wholeness” and harmony, and the peace of God which passes all human understanding. This peace that God gives through Jesus is the key to our ability to live without fear, and overcome the anxiety that results from the bad news which bombards us every day.

So what is this “peace” Jesus talks about? Usually when we think of peace we think first of the absence of war, conflict and violence. But then, most declarations of peace don’t last long, and peace treaties seldom bring resolution to the conflicts that brought war in the first place. Peace may be a goal of most sane, peace-loving human beings, but it sure is awfully elusive, considering our many disagreements, petty jealousies and hatreds, misunderstandings, greed, and lust for power over others. As the prophet Jeremiah said many centuries ago, everyone is saying “Peace, peace, but there is no peace!”

So perhaps the peace that Jesus is talking about is not the *absence* of war, or suffering, or conflict, or all those challenges and hardships that face us as human beings every day. Perhaps Jesus’ peace is the serenity and faith to *accept* that these sufferings are going to happen as we go about life faithfully, seeking God’s will and still going ahead and living without letting the anxiety and fear prevent us from acting. Because anxiety and fear freeze us in our tracks, and keep us from acting out of faith. Take Jesus, for example. He knew that night of the last supper that he was facing some terrible trials and a great ordeal – he even prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to take this “cup of suffering” away from him. But despite the knowledge of what faced him, and the fear and dread that surely

accompanied this knowledge, Jesus went ahead and followed the path God had set for him, even though he knew it would cause him suffering and most assuredly his own death at the hands of his enemies. But because of his faith in God's love and his obedience to God's call, Jesus faced his fears and walked the way of the cross, in order to show his disciples, and all human beings who would follow him in the future, how to live and act faithfully, according to what you believe. Apostles like Peter, Paul, and many others acted with this same faith, which enabled them to act with great courage, despite their fears, to bring the gospel to the whole world.

The good news today is that Jesus promises to give this same courage of conviction and faith to us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send to the whole Church the power of faith in our Lord Jesus, a power which can also help you and mean live through the challenges and obstacles that face us in our lives today. The apostle Paul spoke of this in his letter to the Romans, chapter 5, when he said, *"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this gift in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."* (Rom. 5:1-5)

This is the power of faith that God gives each of us through the Holy Spirit. All we have to do is open our hearts in order to have access to it! I know it sounds easy to say, but that is the promise: God's offer of faith and power to all who call upon him. Faith that gives us certain hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and the power to believe and act on our faith out of love for God and neighbor. The "trick" for you and me, however, is to learn how to "let go" of our dependence upon ourselves and our own "human powers", and let God lead us to a new way of living with faith – despite all our fears and the obstacles that stand in our way (many that we create for ourselves).

So faith doesn't take all the fear away, and the power of God through the Holy Spirit doesn't remove all those obstacles that keep us from living God's promised abundant life. Just because you and I "believe in Jesus" doesn't make all the challenges in life melt away! Life can even get "harder" and more complex, when we believe and seek to act on our faith! (Doesn't seem fair, does it? Do we think we should be *rewarded* for seeing the value of faith in God, and receiving the gift of salvation?) The good news is that God stays with us, and Jesus stands by us, even in the midst of our challenges and fear. Jesus promises to walk with us, and never leave us alone, even as we walk in those dark valleys of the shadow of death, so that even then we need fear no evil, for God is with us, to comfort us. Isn't that *even better* than the empty promises of false prophets and preachers who

deceive us saying that *everything will be better and your problems will go away* just by believing in Jesus? (and making a contribution to their ministry?)

No, Jesus' promise is much better: an advocate with power, the Holy Spirit of God who will give you and me faith to face our fears and anxieties and continue to walk through the challenges and the opportunities, the sorrows and the joys of this life. This gift is the promise that God, through the Holy Spirit, will "make a home with us" in our hearts, to put the power of faith within our very being. And you know what? You and I already have this gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptism. We only have to "tap into it" and let this power of God guide us through the trials of each day. So we thank God for this gift of faith and of the power of God's Holy Spirit. May they give you and me hope and courage as we face each day, knowing that God in Christ Jesus walks with us. So, *come, Lord Jesus!*

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.