

Binkley Baptist Church

“Piece, Peace, God’s Peace/Piece”

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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Sixth Sunday in Easter

John 14:23-29

Easter was only six weeks ago. Do you remember the celebration of it all? The joy, the trumpets, the lilies, the glad alleluias were all glorious. Six weeks ago. Six. But it’s now back to certain routines that are less than joyful. I think it was Kathleen Norris I heard say, “after the ecstasy, the laundry.”

Easter celebrations fade—even in the season of Eastertide—and we return to a life complete with small and large estrangements, disagreements, and misunderstandings. “Christ is risen!” doesn’t mean that evidences of Good Friday suddenly disappear.

There are always, always threats to and in the life of a faith community post-Easter.

The Gospel of John, written and received at the end of the first century, some decades after the first Easter, includes a series of instructions called the “Farewell Discourses” (chapters 14-17), given before Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial—in essence saying, don’t forget my words after it is all over. So in looking back over Jesus’ life and ministry there is poignant remembering, of both threats to the faith and assurances that, even though absent there will be his presence. Though I am not and will not be physically present to you, says Jesus, my presence can still be accessed in your life together. Pay attention when threats—both external and internal—seek to destroy the fellowship of the community.

Peace, peace, my peace I give you, says Jesus. We still need such reminders, don’t we?

Would it surprise you to learn that vehement disagreement over the Supper and Table have plagued the Church for centuries? Sadly, even at Table, peace isn’t always achievable. At the Colloquy at Marburg, Germany in October 1529, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli met face to face after a war of words regarding the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Luther held a view that was later called “consubstantiation,” the view that Christ’s body and blood are present “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. Zwingli, the Anabaptist Swiss reformer, held a more figurative view of the Supper; “This is my body,” best understood as “this signifies my body.” For him it was metaphorical like other of Jesus’ own words, “I am the Vine” or “I am the bread of life.” If for Luther the issue was “sacred presence” in the bread and cup, for Zwingli it was that the Lord’s Supper was essentially a “sacred feast” where Christians enjoy fellowship with one another in the remembering of Jesus’ life and ministry.

The debate at Marburg was harsh and acrimonious, again, over a disagreement about the communion of the Lord's Supper! One report says that at the close of the colloquy Zwingli held out his hand to Luther but Luther declined it and said, "I am astonished that you wish to consider me your brother. You do not belong to the communion of the Christian Church." No peace there. Arguments over theological issues which miss entirely the Holy One's message of peace.

Raymond Carver wrote a marvelous short story entitled, "A Small, Good Thing." The story tells the tale of a Mom and Dad (Ann and Howard) who order a birthday cake for their soon-to-turn 8 year old son Scotty. The cake was ordered on a Saturday afternoon for a Monday morning pick-up. But tragedy strikes the family; Scotty is injured in a fall after school, and before you know it he is hospitalized and barely hanging on for his life. The parents, Howard and Ann, go back and forth from hospital to home across the time of Scotty's hospitalization. When at home, the phone rings and a voice asks, "Have you forgotten about Scotty" then hangs up. Scotty soon dies. The anonymous calls continue and each call compounds the parents' intense grief. Mother Ann eventually realizes that the caller is the baker who had baked the cake and was waiting for payment and pick-up. Howard and Ann go to the bakery, and with clenched fists and white-hot anger confront the baker.

*"Lady, I work sixteen hours a day in this place to earn a living," the baker said. He wiped his hands on his apron. "I work night and day in here, trying to make ends meet." A look crossed Ann's face that made the baker move back and say, "No trouble, now." He reached to the counter and picked up a rolling pin with his right hand and began to tap it against the palm of his other hand. "You want the cake or not? I have to get back to work. Bakers work at night," he said again. His eyes were small, mean looking, she thought, nearly lost in the bristly flesh around his cheeks. His neck was thick with fat.*

*"I know bakers work at night," Ann said. "They make phone calls at night, too. You bastard," she said.*

*The baker continued to tap the rolling pin against his hand. He glanced at Howard.*

*"Careful, careful," he said to Howard.*

*"My son's dead," she said with a cold, even finality. "He was hit by a car Monday morning. We've been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn't be expected to know that, could you? Bakers can't know everything-can they, Mr. Baker? But he's dead. He's dead, you bastard!" Just as suddenly as it had welled in her, the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the wooden table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face, and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. "It isn't fair," she said. "It isn't, isn't fair."*

*Howard put his hand at the small of her back and looked at the baker. "Shame on you," Howard said to him. "Shame."*

*The baker put the rolling pin back on the counter. He undid his apron and threw it on the counter. He looked at them, and then he shook his head slowly. He pulled a chair out from under the card table that*

*held papers and receipts, an adding machine, and a telephone directory. "Please sit down," he said. "Let me get you a chair," he said to Howard. "Sit down now, please." The baker went into the front of the shop and returned with two little wrought-iron chairs. "Please sit down, you people."*

*Ann wiped her eyes and looked at the baker. "I wanted to kill you," she said. "I wanted you dead."*

*The baker had cleared a space for them at the table. He shoved the adding machine to one side, along with the stacks of notepaper and receipts. He pushed the telephone directory onto the floor, where it landed with a thud. Howard and Ann sat down and pulled their chairs up to the table. The baker sat down, too.*

*"Let me say how sorry I am," the baker said, putting his elbows on the table. "God alone knows how sorry. Listen to me. I'm just a baker. I don't claim to be anything else. Maybe once, maybe years ago, I was a different kind of human being. I've forgotten, I don't know for sure. But I'm not any longer, if I ever was. Now I'm just a baker. That don't excuse my doing what I did, I know. But I'm deeply sorry. I'm sorry for your son, and sorry for my part in this," the baker said. He spread his hands out on the table and turned them over to reveal his palms. "I don't have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me, if you can," the baker said. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think. Not evil, like you said on the phone. You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act anymore, it would seem. Please," the man said, "let me ask you if you can find it in your hearts to forgive me?"*

*It was warm inside the bakery. Howard stood up from the table and took off his coat. He helped Ann from her coat. The baker looked at them for a minute and then nodded and got up from the table. He went to the oven and turned off some switches. He found cups and poured coffee from an electric coffee-maker. He put a carton of cream on the table, and a bowl of sugar.*

*"You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said.*

*He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down at the table with them. He waited. He waited until they each took a roll from the platter and began to eat. "It's good to eat something," he said, watching them. "There's more. Eat up. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world in here."*

*They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry, and the rolls were warm and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle*

*years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he'd worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The tiny wedding couples stuck into cakes. Hundreds of them, no, thousands by now. Birthdays. Just imagine all those candles burning. He had a necessary trade. He was a baker. He was glad he wasn't a florist. It was better to be feeding people. This was a better smell anytime than flowers.*

*"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving." (Raymond Carver, "A Small Good Thing," in Cathedral Stories, 1983).*

Forgiveness. Table. Bread. Peace.

A small, good thing to remember six weeks after Easter.

Eat up. There's all the rolls in the world right here.

Take a piece of sweet bread this morning and share in a peace that passes understanding. Take a piece of sweet bread this Lord's Day and remember that the Church remembered that Jesus wanted us to know the things that make for peace. Piece, peace, God's peace/piece.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.