

Shalom in Tampa
John 20:19-29

We bishops find ourselves spending many of our Sundays in local churches around the areas to which we have been assigned. We are invited to preach, to teach, celebrate homecomings and anniversaries, baptize and confirm, and dedicate everything from musical instruments to buildings. In my visits, I have experienced something that seems to have become a standard in services of worship, whether they are contemporary or traditional, whether high-church liturgical or free-spirited revival. It goes under the rubric of “ritual of friendship,” “passing the peace.” They all look the same, at least in the southern United States. It is, from my vantage point, it’s often total chaos as people laugh, hug, and talk to one another, as if they have not already been doing so over a cup of coffee for the previous thirty minutes. Often a pastor will turn to me and say, “Once I turn them loose, I have a hard time getting them back.” Is this really the *peace of Christ*? How shall we pass the peace of Christ?

I have a hard time imagining Jesus suddenly appearing in a room filled with many of those first believers and saying “turn to the person reclining next to you and tell them hello, and how glad that they are there!” I also have difficulty thinking about John Wesley instructing his class leaders to start a meeting with a friendly exchange intended to make everyone feel welcome, happy and warm, especially since they are fleeing from the wrath to come! How shall we pass on the peace of Christ?

When Jesus walked into that room on the evening of the Resurrection, he entered a space that was filled with tension and tears, anxiety and confusion, stress and fear. Those gathered in that room were scared: They fear for their future after following this Jesus who is now gone; they fear for their lives because if the authorities can get to him, surely they can get to the disciples; and they fear this unexpected news from some of the women who report that the grave is empty.

What next? The only thing they know to do is huddle together behind closed doors with no windows.

Our various translations of Scripture help paint this picture although with some variations. For instance, the New Revised Standard Version tells us that on the first night the doors were locked, and on the second night, eight days later, they were simply closed. Now, the new Common English Bible reverses it: closed the first week, locked the second. My trusty and somewhat dusty, Greek lexicon tells me that in both cases, it is the same word! And, that it literally means “shut.” The point is, they have shut themselves away from the world so that they might share their misery together, and to do so in hushed tones, lest anyone hear them; and, behind shut, closed, or locked the doors, lest anyone break in on them.

Would it be too much of a stretch to suggest that the tension, fear, and anxiety in that first room are also present in too many of our churches today and in our denomination as a whole? Over the next few days, thousands of United Methodists will be streaming to Tampa to join us in our quadrennial test of stamina and endurance known as General Conference. There seems to be more apprehension swirling around this event than at any time in recent history. We will be making decisions of historic importance about structure and governance and decline and change and positions and principles and mission. Little wonder there is so much anxiety!

As I was preparing this message, I received an email from Bishop Don Ott. He forwarded to me in that email a “blog” from Laurie Haller, District Superintendent in West Michigan, and clergy leader of that delegation to this General Conference. It was insightful and challenging.

Listen to her second paragraph:

“Just two months ago Sterling Best Places, a research firm specializing in livability rankings, released its report of the fifty most stressful cities (including suburbs) in which to live in the United States. Guess which city is the most stressed-out city in the country? Tampa. In fact, five of the ten most stressful cities are in Florida.”

Weell, call me Thomas, but surely, I thought, she read something wrong. She just does not want to leave Michigan for two weeks. After all, this is Florida, land of sun and retirement and leisure and “amusement” parks. So I looked it up, and found that she was absolutely correct. But I also found something else, which will offer us no more encouragement to us: Tampa is also rated as the fifth worst city in America for sleeplessness. I suspect we Methodists might help them move to the top of that list.

For all the fear and anxiety, for all the stress and tension that will accompany the delegates to Tampa, we bishops are not exempt. We can feel it in our midst. The tension divides us geographically, theologically, politically and practically.

- We continue to have conversation about the role of our retired colleagues in the life of the Council, knowing that simply raising the question has caused divisions and created tensions.
- We continue to work toward vital congregations and the mission of the church, knowing that not everyone is on the same page of what to measure, how to measure or even if we should measure!
- We continue to think about how we lead the church as a “council” and whether a new way of organizing and reforming the Council (with or without a non-residential bishop as president) will lead boldly into the future.

What transformed that first group of believers on the evening of the Resurrection was the presence of Jesus. But more than that, it was his gift of peace to broken hearts and troubled spirits. It calmed and reassured them. Before we go forth to lead the whole church, to preside at General Conference sessions, to serve in our areas, or to meet as “Council,” perhaps we need to experience again the transforming presence of Christ in our midst.

Again, the blog from Laurie Haller helped frame the question I pose to you, my sisters and brothers, colleagues in this blessed community. She asks,

“If the General Conference cannot find a way to incarnate Christ’s love in this stressed-out city, what does that say about our denomination? ... Are we *inadvertently modeling*

the paralyzing anxiety that results in local churches turning in on themselves when stressed about their future?” (Emphasis, mine)

inadvertently modeling the paralyzing anxiety. So now I ask, more specifically to our context this afternoon, can we bishops find a way to incarnate Christ’s love? Can we find a way to lead and model and extend the peace of Christ to the delegates, to Tampa, to our world? How might we do that? Allow me to make a few suggestions to start the conversation, and I literally mean start the conversation.

First, we might extend it as storytellers. As I have lived with this text for a few weeks, I have seen in it the entire story of the Gospel, a story that must be told again and again. When Jesus stands in the midst of those frightened disciples, everything is connected. He offers his wounds (Crucifixion) as signs of sacrificial love, connecting the Suffering Servant in Isaiah with his own journey to Jerusalem and the agony on the cross. He offers himself, alive again (Resurrection), raised and set loose in the world. He breathes on them, and the breath creates the life of the church, recalling the creation story and God’s breath. He connects the whole sweep of God’s story of love and redemption for all of creation.

Recently I was in a gathering at Duke Divinity School where Stanley Hauerwas spoke about theological education. In his presentation, he referenced an article written by theologian Robert W. Jenson, “*How the World Lost its Story.*” Jenson begins with these words:

“It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel ... It is the church’s constitutive task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so ... as a promise claimed from God and proclaimed to the world. It is the church’s mission to tell all who will listen ... that the God of Israel has raised Jesus from the dead, and to unpack the ... import of that fact.”

That, in essence, is the story that is told visually and experientially in that stressed-filled room that evening. And that, my sisters and brothers, is the story we are called upon to tell and live boldly – word and deed! Jenson suggests that the world lost its story because it “was defined by

the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller ... If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other god than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world.”

While we will at several points during the coming seventeen days bemoan the fact that we have nothing to do but sit around like wilting potted plants, we do have the opportunity in many venues to tell the story, to remind this General Conference that the Gospel is the story that shapes us and redeems us and send us into a world that has lost its story.

Growing up in Mississippi I was exposed constantly to storytellers, both within my own family of origin, and within the culture around me. We told stories, and there were those who did it better than others: William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Will Campbell, Walker Percy, and lately John Grisham wrote the stories; Shelby Foote recorded history as story; blues musicians from the Mississippi Delta sang the stories with feelings that arose from the depths of soul and human experience; and, of course, Elvis sang stories in ways that transcended generations and bridged divisions of race, class, and status. We are storytellers with a holy story; and like any other good story, this one connects with the human condition and builds bridges of peace.

How shall we experience and extend the peace of Christ? By being storytellers.

Second, by being a non-anxious presence. I recognize and admit that this is a very American term, and may not always translate well into other languages. Let me attempt to say something about what it means for us as leaders. In a world filled with broken relationships, with systems that perpetuate misguided power, and with retaliatory violence promoted as the only way to peace, the need for leaders who will not give in to those practices is paramount. Non-anxious leaders offer an alternative way of peace and justice with calmness and self-control, and without getting caught up in an emotional system that hurts or destroys. In his book *Failure of Nerve*, Edwin Friedman writes that leaders function as the immune systems of the institutions

they lead. They have the capacity to obtain clarity about principles and vision, and can regulate their own emotions in the face of reactivity within the system. (page 231)

I sense that non-anxious presence in Jesus, perhaps nowhere better exhibited than in that room in the aftermath of the Resurrection. He did not allow himself to get caught up in the anxiety of the moment, but rather pointed to a different reality that was connected to the entire biblical witness. He provided exactly what that fear-riddled room needed, a calm assurance of the promise that he had made before: I will be with you; I will not leave you.

Over the course of the next several days, we will have opportunity to exhibit some non-anxious ways of being present in and leading this General Conference, and indeed the whole church. It will be found and experienced in the language we use, in the spirit we project, and in the grace we exhibit. That is the way of Christ. It is a way that weeps over a city because it does not know the things that make for peace, and yet rides into the city any way. It is a way that walks into a room and provides the love that is needed to cast out fear; and then repeats it the following week because one of the believers struggled. Notice the non-anxious Jesus does not reprimand Thomas, nor criticize him for his absence or his questions.

Author, pastor, and teacher Frederick Buechner writes that "...for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love." (*Wishful Thinking*, page 69) As we move around the hallways of General Conference, as we preside, as we relate, and as we return to our episcopal areas, can we offer such unconditional, non-anxious love?

So, how shall we experience and extend the peace of Christ?

Finally, as those who reclaim Wesley's vision of Christian conferencing. Before any of our modern efforts to understand leadership and group dynamics; before any of the psychological approaches to dealing with difficult people; before any protests about Robert's

Rules of Order, Wesley understood that coming together in conference could be a means of grace. Later this afternoon, and throughout our days of preparation, we will be provided some tools and methods for creating an atmosphere where conferencing together might actually become a holy means of grace, even with a group of a thousand. We will turn to our own spiritual preparations, not just legislative rules or agenda-driven time limits.

In his book, *Methodist Connectionalism*, Russ Ritchey recalls a journal entry from our first bishop, Francis Asbury. After one of the conferences over which he presided, he described the event, but you can hear in his words some concern. Asbury wrote, “We were in great haste and did much business in a little time.” That could be a commentary on the last hours of our most recent General Conferences Friday night at 11 o’clock. Ritchey suggests that we

“...would benefit from less production, less preoccupation with machinery, less bookmaking, and more Christian conference, more reflective conversation, more effort to discern the work of God. If Conference is a distinctive Methodist way of being church, if conferring can be a means of grace, if holy conferencing can really be business, then perhaps Methodism needs to worry a little less about what is on the page and more about what is in the heart.” (page 62)

When Jesus walked into that room, he did not lecture. He did not scold. Rather, he offered peace and his presence, wounds and all. In other words, he touched their hearts. They were renewed through the power of the resurrected Christ in their midst, a kind of holy conferring that transformed their lives. The anxiety and fear they felt were dispelled because now they knew in a fresh new way that it was God who acts decisively to transform and to hold the future.

Before we go forth to lead and pass on the peace of Christ, our spirits need to be relieved of our own fears and anxieties, and to be renewed with hope. That starts at this table, where we experience eating and drinking together, receiving these elements of God’s amazing love. At this table we will line up with sisters and brothers from around the world, from different theological

places, and from different experiences and expressions of the Gospel at this table. Today, let us find, individually and collectively, the peace of God which passes all understanding, a peace that will keep our hearts and minds tuned to Christ, relieving anxiety and calming fears so that we might lead into the future. And then there shall be *shalom* in Tampa and beyond.