

My Peace I Give You

John 14:23-29

Do you remember the first time your parents left you alone; or when you were left with a childcare provider, or the first day of school, or the end of a relationship, or the death of someone beloved? As Jesus takes leave of his disciples, such experiences come to our consciousness. Even in the midst of Easter worship, anticipatory or remembered grief casts its shadow.

Today's text is taken from the section of the discourse triggered by Judas's question, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us but not to the *kosmos* [world]?" This is a clear reminder that the Farewell Discourse is intended for Jesus' disciples only and not for the curious outsider. This is privileged conversation.

John's Gospel was probably written in Ephesus during the 80s or early 90s of the first century, the period of time when the house churches were being evicted from the synagogue. Hostility was high, and mutual suspicion reigned. The fledgling house churches were keeping clear boundaries that separated them both from the synagogue and from the Roman temples in Ephesus. Conflict can sharpen differences, as well as motivate groups to clarify their identity. Jesus' Farewell Discourse reflects this historical context and contributes to these two tasks. This is why the farewell takes the form it does. The disciples' questions reflect the questions harbored by the members of the Johannine community, and, in the guise of answering them, Jesus addresses the members of John's house churches as well.

Quite likely, Judas asked the question to construct the barrier between the house churches and the larger world or cosmos. Why did you choose us over them? Why is this special revelation reserved for us? Jesus' answer subtly undermines the question by indicating its irrelevance. There is something more important than dividing the house between us and them. Pay attention to the basic tasks of a disciple. Jesus

speaks of "keeping" his word (ton *logon*, v. 23) and then of "keeping" his words (*tous logous*, v. 24).

It seems that for every responsibility the disciples have, Jesus and the Father provide the resources they need to carry out their tasks. In this case, Jesus and the Father will "make their home" with the disciples. The imagery is from the building trades. To build (*poieō*) a home could be translated to "craft or fashion" a home. Of course the home being discussed is not a building under construction. But John's community is very much a work in progress that needs a home, now that the synagogue can no longer function as a home for them. As the disciples nurture the word/words of Jesus, so Jesus and the Father not only craft a "home" for them but provide the very word/words they are to study and hold firm.

However, this is a Farewell Discourse, and the danger of such a discourse for John's community is that it leaves them feeling empty and perhaps a bit abandoned. In absence all they have to look forward to? The answer, of course, is a hearty no! Jesus' departure will bring a new presence to the community. In a world where members of marginal groups were subjected to Roman "justice," an advocate was a welcome addition to the community. Yet the primary task of the Paraclete was to teach, not defend. If so, the role of the Advocate is to activate the memory banks of the community so that they can remember Jesus' teachings. The Holy Spirit will "teach you everything" and "remind you of all that I have said to you" (v. 26). So the community will have help in "keeping" Jesus' word and words.

In fact, there is a continuum involving the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus departs, indeed *because* Jesus will depart, the Holy Spirit will come. As Jesus is reunited with the Father, the community will be united to the Spirit. This is an unusual Farewell Discourse. Its yield is "peace" to encourage troubled hearts. The verb *aphiēmi* ("my peace I leave with you," v. 27) could be translated "bequeath." This Farewell Discourse testifies to the resources and riches that the disciples inherit.

There will be no surprises, because the Advocate will tell them all things in advance.

(William R. Herzog II)

This passage of John's Farewell Discourse tells that the Advocate is coming to remind the disciples of Jesus and his teaching (v. 26). Jesus reminds his followers that they need not be fearful or have anxiety (v. 27), and that rejoicing is appropriate for this departure (v. 28). The context of Jesus' sayings here is the whole of the Farewell Discourse, including the earlier promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (vv. 17, 23) and the promise that the disciples will not be left orphaned (v. 18).

While Jesus' departure involved grief and loss, he spoke of his continuing presence, which distinguishes this time from other times when sadness is appropriate. The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church contains a note to the burial rites that talks of Easter joy and goes on to say, "This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend."

Many of us have great anxiety around what to say and what not to say to people who are grieving. Anxiety, fear, and troubled hearts are on Jesus' mind (v. 27b). The antidote to such fear is the peace given by Jesus, and not peace as the world gives (v. 27a). Many people yearn for peace in the world's terms: cessation of conflict, whether psychological tension or warfare; a sense of calm or serenity of spirit. The peace that Jesus promises as he takes leave might include such things, but the peace that Jesus gives is nothing less than the consequence of the presence of God. When God is present, peace is made manifest. Many churches that include a sign of peace during worship often place it immediately following prayers of confession and absolution. When they do so, they are enacting the truth that where sin is forgiven, the new community of peace is a reality. This gift of peace is bound up with all that makes for righteousness or right relation: love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and thanksgiving.

Freedom from anxiety is directly related to our putting our whole trust in God's grace and love, which becomes possible as we remember that love created us for love. As we become clear about who we are and where we stand in life, we are better able to stay not anxious in a variety of situations.

Most families know what it is like to be at a family gathering wondering whether great aunt so-and-so will have too much to drink or uncle whoosit will have one of his "spells." In the same way, most families know how everyone calms down when father gets home from work or when mother steps in and takes charge. The capacity to be not anxious helps others to calm down as well. This is not unlike what happens in the presence of God or in a time of peace that is not as the world gives. We see this reality at work in the ministry of the risen Jesus. Remember that occasion after the resurrection when the disciples were afraid and gathered behind locked doors. "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'" (20:19). Jesus was and is the not anxious presence of God.

Jesus' own capacity for setting aside anxiety by putting his whole trust in God's grace and love is shown here when he refers to the "ruler of this world" (v. 30). Jesus' conflict with the religious authorities of his day was introduced near the beginning of John's account, in the story of the cleansing of the temple (2:13-22), and anyone who has followed the story thus far must expect that there will be no happy ending. Even Jesus is aware that he is probably going to his death.

John does not show us his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:30-56; Mark 14:26-42; Luke 22:39-46). Instead, he shows us a Jesus who is confident that as he is with God, so the ruler of this world will not be able to exert power over him. When he says, "Rise, let us be on our way" (v. 31), Jesus is speaking of the way that will lead to his death, the way of the cross, and is confident that death is not the worst fate in life. The worst fate would be to act without integrity, breaking faith with the source of his life. (**Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare**)

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