

May 22, 2022
Psalm 67 / John 14:23-29
"Not as the World Gives"
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Psalm 67 begins with an echo of the ancient, threefold Jewish blessing that comes from the Torah, in the book of Numbers. It's the Priestly Blessing, *Birkat Kohanim* in Hebrew, the so-called Aaronic blessing because it's the way God tells Moses to tell his brother, Aaron, the priest, to bless the Israelites.

In Psalm 67 we hear, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make (God's) face to shine upon us." And hear that in the full Aaronic blessing: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the Lord make (the Lord's) face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up (the Lord's) countenance upon you, and give you peace." Shalom.

Or "The Eternal bless you and protect you! The Eternal deal kindly and graciously with you! The Eternal bestow divine favor upon you and grant you peace!"

I like this translation from The Message: "God bless you and keep you, God SMILE on you and GIFT you, God look you full in the face and make you prosper."

Live long and prosper, you might say.

On that note, fun fact! That famous Vulcan greeting from Star Trek, with its corresponding hand gesture, was inspired by this same Jewish priestly blessing and the related hand sign historically used by priests – the Kohanim, beginning with Aaron – when offering the benediction, mimicking the Hebrew letter, shin, which begins one of the names for God, Shaddai.

Leonard Nimoy, aka Spock, grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Boston, the son of Ukrainian immigrants. You weren't supposed to look when the priest offered the blessing; instead, you were meant to direct focus on the words and on God and not on the people saying the words.

But he remembered, as a boy, peaking out from beneath his father's prayer shawl to see the priest using the hand sign from which he derived his one-handed, Vulcan version.

If you get nothing else from this sermon, there you go! Live long and prosper. The Eternal bestow divine favor upon you and grant you peace.

In the reading from John's gospel we get a blessing from Jesus to his disciples, part of series of "farewell" discourses found in Chapters 13-17 as he prepares them for life after his predicted death. The disciples are not ready to say goodbye.

He talks about love, of course, and he assures them that even though he won't be among them in the flesh, he will remain with them in spirit. God's Spirit, the Advocate, will be with them. Always.

Advocate translated from the Greek "Parakletos," meaning helper – literally, "called alongside."

God's Spirit will remain alongside them, effectively keeping Jesus alive IN them, reminding them about everything he taught when they forget. The disciples' hearts are breaking, but he is gently consoling them, encouraging their confidence and hope that there will be as much good news in his departure as their was in his advent, his arrival, his coming near.

Bouyed by the Spirit, THEY will carry the good news forward. One commentary describes it like a tablet that dissolves into water: the tablet may be gone, but its presence pervades the water completely.

And with that image in mind, then comes the actual blessing. Like the Psalmist, you can hear in his words a further echo of the Birkat Kohanim: "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."

Peace. Shalom. A sentiment he repeats when he appears to them after his death and resurrection.

Jesus reminds them that he was sent by God, that everything he's taught them comes from God. And so the peace he offers them IS the very peace of God. The peace of God which, as Paul reminds the Philippian church, "surpasses all understanding."

That's shalom. And shalom, understand, is comprehensive peace. Complete peace. Deep peace. It's both personal and communal well-being. It's wholeness, contentment, joy, tranquility, security, safety, prosperity, harmony. A manifestation of divine presence and grace.

Frederick Buechner elaborates: "Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars. Beggars can't be choosers; we'd most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew peace, shalom, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself."

That means the possibility of peace WITHIN even when there is not peace WITHOUT. And God knows that there are so many places in our city and around the world where there is no peace without. And no end in sight.

But shalom offers the possibility of peace in the midst of what IS, within the promise of what will yet be. Shalom involves increased RESILIENCY within ourselves to fully engage and be present to our lives and the world around us, as they are, to feel what we feel, even the suffering – and so increased CAPACITY to be more compassionate with ourselves and others.

That is the kind of peace, for many of us, that can so easily surpass our understanding and experience.

Amy shared a poem with me this week, one she recently came across. A poem by Dorothy Hunt, called "Peace Is This Moment Without Judgment":

*Do you think peace requires an end to war?
Or tigers eating only vegetables?
Does peace require an absence from
your boss, your spouse, yourself?...
Do you think peace will come some other place than here?*

*Some other time than Now?
In some other heart than yours?
Peace is this moment without judgment.
That is all. This moment in the Heart-space
where everything that is is welcome.
Peace is this moment without thinking
that it should be some other way,
that you should feel some other thing,
that your life should unfold according to your plans.
Peace is this moment without judgment,
this moment in the Heart-space where
everything that is is welcome.*

We remember that the same Jesus who came to bring peace, who here blesses his disciples with peace, said elsewhere that he came NOT to bring peace, but division. As Buechner suggests, the apparent contradiction is really more of a clarification of what he meant by peace.

He writes, "One of the titles by which Jesus is known is Prince of Peace, and he used the word himself in what seem at first glance to be two radically contradictory utterances. ... The contradiction is resolved when you realize that, for Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love." Peace, God's peace, that so easily and so often surpasses our understanding and experience.

"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."

Easier said than done, but Jesus gives his disciples peace all the same. In fact, he LEAVES them with peace, which I take to mean that he doesn't simply offer peace as a one-time gift to be received and enjoyed alone, but as a perpetual blessing in which to be grounded, and so better able to be shared with others. That is shalom.

He also said, "I do not give to you as the world gives" – and here's where the sermon title comes in. It begs the question, "How exactly does the world give?" "How does the world give peace?" And since we, too, are in and of the world, how do we tend to give peace?

I imagine that would be a great prompt for discussion in pairs or small groups, to share with each other our understanding of what it means to give as the world does, and what it means not to. But allow me to offer one quick thought for your consideration – with encouragement to dig deeper into the question on your own or in conversation with others AFTER the service!

It seems to me that the “world,” unlike Jesus, unlike God, offers peace, at best, conditionally. With conditions largely rooted in insecurity and anxiety and fear, in hearts and lives that are deliberately exploited to feel troubled and afraid.

We live in a world that makes it hard to be whole, that makes the experience of shalom, peace within and peace without, difficult. We live in a world – to be sure, an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy – quick to assign privilege and poverty. Quick to draw distinctions between us and them, between deserving and undeserving, between worthy and unworthy. Quick to name scapegoats.

We live in a world where conflict and dis-ease are not just fanned but fueled, where we are socialized to believe that there is not enough peace, shalom – everything we NEED – to go around. And because we collectively function that way, there often isn't.

I've been thinking a lot about Buffalo this week. About an 18-year-old white kid, operating out of a toxic blend of insecurity, anxiety and fear, fueled by a racist, white supremacist ideology. An 18-year-old white kid so tragically, horrifically convinced that peace for him and for people that look like him (and me) could only come by killing, by taking peace away from 10 Black lives, and from their families and a community now left to grieve. To fear. To rage. Again. Still.

There are too many Buffalos to name, God hear our prayer. This IS “peace” as the world promises it.

We live in a world where the resulting, ongoing absence of peace WITHOUT, an absence felt most painfully and consistently by Black and brown communities, makes it hard to claim peace for ourselves WITHIN. And where our collective failure to nurture

peace WITHIN makes the absence of peace WITHOUT more likely and more prevalent and more devastating. And on and on it goes.

Peace founded not on common good but on the myth of individual meritocracy. Peace will be yours IF YOU earn it. If you can afford it. If you work harder. If you pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. If you prove yourself. If you achieve certain things. If you get that thing or do that thing. If you accumulate stuff. If you believe a certain way. If you look a certain way. If you pretend to be someone you're not. If you fall in line. If you avoid conflict.

If you take it from someone else. If, if, if.

But such peace is not peace at all. At best it's elusive, fleeting. It's a mirage BECAUSE it's conditional. Because there is always another if.

There is no WAY to peace, peace IS the way, as others have said. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

"The Eternal bestow divine favor upon you and grant you peace!"

No ifs, ands or buts about it. We all DESERVE shalom, no strings attached. Shalom belongs to all of us because, BECAUSE, within the divine order, we all ALREADY belong. My shalom is bound up in yours; and yours in mine. We are mutually accountable to shalom. My peace depends on your peace, and your peace on mine.

I close with a blessing from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a blessing that expands on the *Birkat Kohanim* Aaron first gave the Israelites, on the blessing Jesus gave to his disciples, on the divine blessing given to all of us.

Imagine that when we offer each other that same peace, as we do every Sunday and should really do more often, NOT as the world does, this is what it means:

*I give to you a heart of serenity,
the grace to be undisturbed
even as chaos surrounds.*

*I give to you a heart of harmony,
that you may be forgiving,
knowing you are forgiven.*

*I give to you a heart of hope,
confident in the grace that moves
unseen and vast.*

*I give to you a heart of acceptance,
to be present with what is
even if it is not what shall be.*

*I give to you a heart of wholeness,
that you may know you belong
and all that is within you be healed.
I give to you a heart of gentleness,
to live graciously with all,
even those who are not at peace.*

*I give to you a heart of love,
that you know you are my Beloved,
and be at peace with all . . .*

My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. Always.

May it be so.