***FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: PEACE***

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Texts: Galatians 5:22-23 and Luke 10:38-42

How do you greet someone when you meet – whether it is running into an old friend on the street, welcoming a neighbor at your door, greeting a new colleague at work, or meeting a new student in your class? Do you say, “Hello!” or “Hey!” or “How are you?” or do you just offer a vacant stare or icy glare? In Arabic speaking nations, you are apt to hear, “*As-salamu alaykum*!” – “Peace be with you!” And the response is, “*Wa alaikum assalam*!” – “And upon you be peace!” In Israel you are likely to hear, “*Shalom*!” – “Peace!” And in certain corners of our nation, especially Greenwich Village, you might hear, “Yo! Peace, man!” In many corners of the world in a variety of languages, “Peace” is extended as a greeting to friends and strangers alike. The first words out of the mouth of the risen Jesus to his stunned disciples are, “*Peace be with you!*” So peace is a form of greeting, like *aloha*, which also carries an element of peace in translation.

Some years ago, when I was looking at colleges with our son Dan, we went to Chicago; while he stayed overnight on campus at the University of Chicago, I returned to our hotel near the airport. At dinner time, I asked if there was a good place to get deep dish pizza nearby, and the concierge advised that there was a great place within walking distance, just a couple of blocks away. As I was walking to the restaurant, a disheveled man approached and asked if I could spare some money for him to get a meal. I told him that I was on my way to get pizza at a restaurant down the block, and if he wanted a meal, he was welcome to join me. So he did. He was a somewhat troubled fellow, the first clue being his repeated assurance to me throughout our meal – “I’m not going to hurt you!” and “I would never hurt you!’ – for which I was grateful, though when we parted ways, I did glance back over my shoulder more than once to be sure he made good on his promise!

Is that the kind of peace that is being offered in those greetings – “I am not going to hurt you!”? Is it the kind of peace that says, “I come in peace, not to attack you” or perhaps “May you show no violence toward your neighbor – including me!”? Perhaps in some instances that is the assurance being offered or requested, but in most cases, the peace in such greetings is more than a disclaimer of violence. It is a blessing: *Peace be with you!* The word for peace in those languages in which it is a greeting, including Hebrew and Greek in our Old and New Testaments, is a more holistic peace that embraces health and wholeness, harmony, prosperity, and well-being. That is the kind of peace of which Paul speaks to the Galatians as a fruit of the Spirit.

While our world is certainly in need of the kind of peace of which Isaiah speaks in which the wolf lies down with the lamb, the kind of peace in which nation’s weapons of war are beaten into farm implements, we are also in desperate need of that peace that rules our hearts day to day, that peace of mind that allows us to sleep at night and survive the conflicts of the day. In the words of Desmond Tutu: *“Peace is not a goal to be reached, but a way of life to be lived.”[[1]](#endnote-1)* And so I wonder: Do you have that kind of peace in your heart and in your life – that peace that is a way of life? And if not, where might you find it?

Advertisers want to convince you that the purchase of their product, whether it be a car, a cruise, or a cabernet, is going to grant you that peace. Others reassure you that if you have enough wealth stored up then you will be at peace. But Jesus makes clear that wealth cannot offer that peace either. As Craig Barnes writes in his book *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*:

*[P]eace and blessings come not from wanting more and more, but from finding our place in the will of God. That’s pretty prophetic thinking for a society that keeps telling us our happiness is dependent on improving ourselves. It’s the lure of this dream that keeps us moving from place to place. But it just never works. That is because it’s the same old person who keeps moving to all of those new places.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What he suggests is that the peace we seek cannot be found out there somewhere, but must begin within us, by changing who we are and how we view the world and embracing the will of God for us; that is the work of the Spirit. And that is where this familiar story of Martha and Mary comes in.

Martha and Mary are sisters – they also have a brother Lazarus, but that is a story for another day. Jesus comes to visit them, and they are thrilled to have him in their home and want to make him feel welcome. For Martha this means busying herself with all the household details of hosting their guest – preparing the meal, setting the table, and getting things well organized. For Mary, it means sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to him.

In 1971 my family spent a night at a little bed and breakfast on the isle of Skye on the west coast of Scotland. It was the home of a Mrs. McCloud. Breakfast was a multiple course meal served by Mrs. McCloud in various states of dress. When she served the juice, Mrs. McCloud was dressed in her housecoat, slippers, and hair band. With the serving of porridge, her hair was combed and the hair band gone. With the serving of eggs and sausages, she wore a dress, and by the time she cleared the dishes, she was fully dressed, having traded her slippers for shoes. She swept in and out like a whirlwind, with only an occasional word to us in her heavy, Scottish brogue. I imagine that Martha was a little like Mrs. McCloud. She was so busy rushing around completing her tasks that she had no time to listen to what Jesus had to say.

Mary, by contrast, had her full attention focused on Jesus. One of the simple gifts we have to share with others is being fully present with them and giving them our full attention. Mary offered that gift to Jesus. She did not concern herself with preparations for the meal; she simply sat at Jesus’ feet to hear what he had to say. If, as Henry David Thoreau suggests, “*it takes two to speak truth – one to speak, and another to hear,*” then Mary had assumed a position for hearing the truth at the feet of the one who spoke the Truth. Such posture was atypical for a woman. Students sat at the feet of their teachers, young Jewish boys at the feet of the rabbi, disciples at the feet of their master. But Mary dared to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen, a woman in the posture of a disciple.

This week my sister, the third born among us four siblings, sent out a text to us with a picture of three small children with the caption: MIT STUDY SAYS SECOND BORNS ARE THE BIGGEST CAUSE OF CHAOS AT HOME AND IN SOCIETY AS A WHOLE.” Only my brother, the second born, disagreed with that conclusion. I suspect that Martha was the second born, because she created a stir in the house over the choice made by her sister. She was incensed that Mary was assuming a position at Jesus’ feet that she had no right to assume and was shirking her duties in the kitchen. The whole burden of hosting the meal thus fell on Martha. Fuming silently was not in her nature, so Martha blurts out to Jesus, “*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?*” Her frustration with her sister is vented at Jesus. By allowing Mary to sit at his feet, he is somehow perpetuating the injustice; Martha is either blaming Jesus for Mary’s behavior or is trying to convince him to side with her against her sister – classic MIT study behavior for the second child – with apologies to all you second children!

Martha expected Jesus to side with her, but instead he gently chides her for allowing distractions with things to blind her to the more important thing which Mary had chosen – to listen to Jesus as a disciple. As a child I always liked this message, for it seemed to me the perfect reply to my mother’s requests to help with Sunday dinner. She was Martha in the kitchen, and I was just trying to be Mary at the feet of whatever guests I could entice to watch the Steeler football game with me – though to be fair, Jesus was never one of those guests. Was not the gist of the story that it was more important to spend time with your guests than to be fussing around with the meal in the kitchen? My mother never bought that interpretation, and neither do I. The story of Mary and Martha is not about the proper way to entertain guests at a dinner party. It is not about the supremacy of casual conversation over cooking. It is about distractions and discipleship and finding peace. Which of the two sisters do you think was more at peace?

Mary chose to sit as a disciple and listen for a word from Jesus while he was with them. It was a rare opportunity in which she found peace in the presence of the Prince of Peace. She may have been happy ordering in falafel or pizza as long as she could hear what he had to say. Martha chose a path of discipleship too – by serving; but it offered little peace, for she resented having to serve alone and missed hearing Jesus. Perhaps if she had served cheerfully instead of judging Mary and scolding Jesus, she too may have found peace that day and been commended for her faithful service.

Sometimes we find peace in serving and sometimes in listening, sometimes in puttering and sometimes in prayer. Peace is not about the things out there that you **do**; it is about the things in here, in your heart, in that space where the Spirit works, encouraging you to embrace the will of God and offering you wholeness, wellness, and harmony with God and the world. It is about living in the presence of God and with the assurance of God’s love and never-ending care for you. Frederick Buechner suggests, “*for Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.*”[[3]](#endnote-3) Love of God for you and the love of God in you – those are the things that make for peace! May such love be present in your life, and so may peace be with you and in you, this day and all days! Amen

1. Desmond Tutu quoted in *Great Peacemakers*, Ken Beller & Heather Chase, LTS Press:2008, p.35 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*, 2003, p.165-166 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Frederick Buechner, “Peace” in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row:1973, p.69 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)