

## **“Jesus’ Primary Default Position is ‘Peace Be with You’ ”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 23, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31  
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Books have been written about how people face a challenge, cope with change or stress, or even deal with a new situation. Any parent or grandparent, or an attentive aunt or uncle, knows that children react to their surroundings in a wide variety of ways.

When facing a challenge or disappointment, some children yell or scream and complain, while others go in their room and shut the door; some of us deal with stress and tension by eating uncontrollably, while others do not eat at all; some people when in a strange, uncomfortable situation become very quiet and withdrawn, while others become talkative and endlessly chatty; some drink excessively, while others drink almost nothing, not even water. Both routes lead to problems.

What is interesting in terms of the variety of ways that we respond to any given situation is the fact that we often find it difficult to relate to people who are more like us than unlike us. The quiet person may feel a person who goes away and hides is being “too dismissive” or “reacting in an overly sensitive” way, while the person who tends to react by talking may find the very chatty person “a bit much.”

We are all different, and we all have our ways of coping reacting, and carrying on in the face of change, challenge, and chaos.

Jesus had his way of coping. And, for the most part, he coped in the midst of trying and challenging situations not by running and hiding (though he often did spend time in prayer in quiet places after dealing with a difficult situation), or being confrontational (though we know he was capable of calling out those who did not act in helpful, appropriate ways). His primary response, not to ramp up tension and focus on individuals’ frustration, was to offer a gentle and sincere “Peace be with you.”

It can be a very effective way to diminish tension in almost any situation.

Once I witnessed an amazing interaction among a group of boys. Whatever was said and done, tensions escalated, and one teen pushed another teen. Some harsh words were said, and I stood, expectantly waiting more roughhousing. I stood there deciding how I, as an individual, could stop a more violent confrontation.

I need not worry. Just as it looked like fists would be thrown and kicks applied, a little fellow no more than 8 or 9 jumped between the two teens and declared: “You can’t be fighting: my brother and your brother are friends.”

Somehow the young child’s equivalent of “Peace Be with You” stopped the rising aggression, and they went on their separate ways.

What does the word “Peace” mean, anyway? The New Testament is written in Greek, and so the word is *eirene* in Greek (εἰρήνη), or the name “Irene” in English. It is related to the Hebrew word “Shalom,” which can be a greeting much like “hello” but also stands for “peace,” “wholeness,” “wellness,” even “God’s justice and right actions.”

You want the best for the other person, and you are willing to say as much.

Now we live in a culture where responding to anger and attack means finding a better way to be angry and to attack. The power of terrorism today is based on a response that is scarier and more violent than the ways in which the other group acts.

But Jesus knew that escalating the tensions in any situation does not help at all.

Solvita Bennett has offered some ways that we can handle the anger of others, and keep that attitude of peace even in difficult, tension-filled situations. Never join the negative energy of anger, for it will weaken you and you will never regain power to act in helpful, encouraging ways, for the power of anger is all consuming.

Dan Spira suggests that the only place where anger seems to have a place in our world is in boxing, where boxers may prepare for their next bout by ramping up their anger for their opponent, and he goes on to suggest that such an attitude leads to boxers having short careers – they cannot maintain that level of anger and upset for an extended period of time.

Dealing with a very angry person is easier when you can imagine that their attitude is not so much against you, as it is an expression of their own frustration in life.

I learned the power of Jesus’ phrase “Peace be with you” in a very practical workshop-like exercise yesterday, about 25 hours ago. I was in Toronto standing in line for the famous Peameal Bacon sandwich at the St. Lawrence Market, and as I was deciding on what toppings to add to the sandwich, a woman next to me (whom I had noticed standing with a boy of 9 or 10 years old) said to me: “You don’t look happy. What’s wrong?”

I was taken aback. I have never spoken that way to a stranger, and would barely say something like that to a friend, even if I thought there was truth to my observation.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Well, if you are fine, you should look happy.”

I was considering responding “this has nothing to do with you,” but I knew somehow my sermon for today would be shattered if over my shoulder was a mole observing my anger boiling up, so I continued in the conversation as a non-anxious presence: “Well, I am going from here to visit a friend dying of cancer, so I guess I am not completely happy.”

“That must be very hard,” she continued.

“Yes, it is,” I shot back, and went on my way.

As I sat on the other side of the market downing half my sandwich I pondered the exchange that took place, and I realized that there were many thoughts racing through my head. I probably responded as best as I could, but it soon came to me how different the exchange

and the inner emotions would have been if she had said, thinking that somehow I had a dark cloud of emotion around me, "Peace be with you."

Jesus was not one to focus on the pain that people faced, or the worries that dominated their lives, but rather offered them a hopeful outcome that lifted up all that was good around them, within them, and before them. Try it this week, or sometime in the near future. When you see someone struggling, or confused, or lost, offer assistance, leave them with a hopeful message of "Peace be with you." It cannot be said in a trite or throw-away manner. It is a profound and moving offering. It means that you really do care for that person, and the predicament or concerns that he or she may be carrying.

The truth is, we often ask people how they are doing, but we rarely wait to get the answer, or at least we rarely want to hear what that answer might be if it is not "I am fine" or "doing well." Ed Kruse, the principal of HealthierChurch.org, who spoke here in this sanctuary last June, always responds when asked, "How are you?" with the phrase, "I'm grateful." At first I found it a disarming response, but when you get to know the individual and realize how genuine the response really is, you begin to appreciate it for what it says.

"No matter how I feel or what I am facing at this time, I am grateful."

With such an attitude, one can hear the genuine wishes of Jesus: "Peace be with you," and really live with that truth.

If only we all could have the same default position as Jesus, and offer more and more to those we meet, a sincere and personal "Peace be with you."