

## ***My Challenging Peace I give to you***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

November 5, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Jesus said, in John's Gospel version, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*<sup>1</sup>

"Peace" in Christian Testament, in the Gospel of John, is the Greek word "eirene",<sup>2</sup> meaning, essentially, "When all essential parts are brought together."

I often use that portion from John's Gospel, Jesus saying "Peace I leave with you... I do not give to you as the world gives" in Celebrations of Life, recognizing that in times of death, we sometimes don't feel a sense of peace. I introduce it each time by pointing out the context, that it is set in the evening when Jesus is sharing his last meal with his friends, he will soon be arrested and die. We will gather, remembering that sense of community shortly. There is fear in that last meal they share, disorientation. They cannot understand why Jesus so willingly is allowing himself to be executed. It makes no sense to a human sense of logic.

Doesn't this still happen too often today? People having to risk their lives for a cause, to challenge injustice?

"Peace", that Greek word for peace used by John's Gospel, relates closely to the Hebrew Scripture word for Peace, much more familiar to many of us, the Hebrew word "Shalom." When all essential parts are brought together. Wholeness.

When someone dies, we may not always feel that peace. When we are facing injustice, we don't feel embraced by "Eirene" In today's passage, in John chapter 15, Jesus is now talking about associating love and peace. He says: *No one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.*<sup>3</sup>

If we think about it, this can a very unfamiliar association to many of us in our modern, comfortable, and may I say individualistic, context. We might lay down our lives for close family, extended family – hmmm, I don't know. In-laws? Ok, I digress.

But for a friend, in what scenario-challenging situations here in Canada would one friend die for another? We heard about a terribly tragic incident where a mother tried to save her three children from a vengeful father. What about other instances of self-sacrificing love among friends?

This kind of sacrifice happens every day right now in Palestine – Gaza and the West Bank. Friends and strangers risking their lives to save others. In Israel where Hamas exacted vengeance on innocent Israelis, there were many heroic stories of Israelis protecting their neighbours. Have we not learned the lessons taught by two world wars, and many regional conflicts?

---

<sup>1</sup> John chapter 14 (note that this is a chapter before today's reading), verse 27 NRSVUE

<sup>2</sup> If you are interested in the range of meaning attributed to the Greek word "Eirene", please take a look at the Strong's Concordance, found at <https://biblehub.com/greek/1515.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 13

My peace I give to you, not as the world gives to you. That is a challenging kind of peace, we, here, are aspiring to!

Do you feel as frustrated as I do, that we cannot achieve peace in that land? Look at Israel and Palestine, framed by media as Israel versus Hamas, but it has been a cycle of violence and control in Israel and Palestine for decades. An interesting perspective written in the time that “Black Lives Matter” was raging. People were bristling at the slogan – Black Lives Matter – what about other peoples’ lives? Maybe some of us quietly thought that. The writer, a person of colour, herself, observes:

There are many, perhaps including some preachers and some congregants, who do not understand or support the meaning of “Black Lives Matter.” Perhaps to say Black Lives (also) Matter may help to make the meaning plain.

... But in a society where Black lives are devalued as less than, where they are dehumanized as though they do not also contain the same Imago Dei (the image of God) as all other human beings, it is not enough to say that all lives matter. It becomes imperative that the church acknowledge that love of neighbour must be extended equally to those of a dark hue in a way that epitomizes one’s life laid down for one’s friends.<sup>4</sup>

I’m wondering – and this is me now, wondering: what if we apply that logic to situations like the ongoing Russian attacks on Ukrainians, and Israel’s retaliatory destruction of Gaza that has killed thousands of innocent people, in a muscular effort to root out militants?

A Russian proclaiming “Ukrainian Lives Matter” in Russia would be rather radical, courageous, dangerous even, wouldn’t it? It doesn’t mean that Ukrainians matter more than Russians, but in a time where propaganda flies, and Ukrainians are dehumanized, that radical acknowledgment the work of “peace.”

And we might look with fresh eyes at the emotionally exhausting, often infuriating, war of Israel and Hamas that seems to see no end. We continue to have to actively and vigilantly unlearn anti-Semitism, right here at home, an anti-Jewish sentiment that has been embedded in us so deeply we often don’t notice it.

Israel lost too many lives at the hands of brutal Hamas militants. But the Israeli response has, I think many of us agree, been disproportionate, seeming more like retribution. Given the decades-long cycle of violence in the Holy Land, we know that violence alone does not beget peace – that security that Israel yearns for, and I pray for, and the land and human rights that Palestinians desperately want, *will never come*. *Eirene* requires combatants see one another, conflict with words, then, together, seek meaningful compromise. That is more the challenging peace that Jesus speaks of.

What can we do way over here? Perhaps we work on our own sense of “Eirene” – what does that peace mean in our everyday lives, our relationships, our conversations, our actions?

---

<sup>4</sup> Commentary on John 15:9-17 by Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, May 9, 2021 found at [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-5)  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-5>

But even more, are we not also called to proclaim, as loudly as we possibly can, that neighbours whose lives, whose families, are reduced to generalities, to casualty or fatality statistics, their lives matter? They mattered to Jesus in his time. They matter to God, in God's mysterious kin-dom vision that, if we dare to accept the Mission Jesus puts before us – we must, we must, believe that God has a vision of shalom, of Eirene for our world. Amen.