

“Peace” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
May 9, 2010 – Easter 6C

The gospel this morning tells us that we are quickly approaching the end of the Easter season with Ascension Day and Pentecost just ahead of us. Over the last five weeks, we have celebrated resurrection, heard stories about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, and listened to the disciples try to figure out how to move forward through all of that. Now we hear Jesus speaking to them about what was going to happen next. He was preparing them for his leaving again and while the gospel of John doesn’t go into detail about the Ascension, the Book of Acts tells us that “Jesus was taken up on a cloud to be with God.” “But don’t be anxious,” we heard him tell the disciples today, “The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” And then in a gesture of love, Jesus gave them a wonderful gift, “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.” And so, by the end of this passage instead of being concerned about Jesus’ exit, I’m actually left breathing a little more easily. This passage reminds me what it is we need in order to move forward and what it is that we have to give as we go.

It’s peace pure and simple. Peace in every sense of that word. The peace that is wholeness – that is shalom. The peace that is the absence of anxiety, the presence of love, the absence of fear and the presence of grace. And this gospel passage says that that peace is never far from any of us – it has been given us, left for us once and for all, it’s here to be received. And while I can’t say that I live in that peace all the time, I know it when I feel it. Maybe you do too. Peace is what grounds us. Frees us. Cleanses us and gently inspires us. Peace is what steadies us into action or calms us into rest. It’s that holy something that fills us with a sense that all shall be well, no matter what. No matter what we are experiencing now, no matter what is just around the corners ahead or behind us. Peace is what keeps hopeful visions alive in our hearts. Peace is what breaks down barriers inside of us and out in the world too. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said. “Do not let them be afraid.” All shall be well because God will make it so.

Now I want to tie in the story we heard from Acts this morning with this gospel and this pre-Ascension theme because I think that that peace is probably what Lydia and the disciples felt down by the river in Phillipi.

Remember the story: Paul was led to Phillipi by a vision. (The Spirit perhaps?) And after journeying by foot and by boat and by foot, he and a couple of other disciples arrived in that town and stayed for a few days. And on the Sabbath they went down by the river to pray. And while they were down there they talked to the women who were there too. They had nothing to fear, right? Now one of the women, who was at the river that morning was Lydia and we know only a couple of things about her: we know that she sold fine purple cloth which made her a woman of some wealth, and we know that that morning she was listening, in fact “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly,” Acts says. Notice it was God who opened her heart, not the disciples and I think that matters. The disciples were simply present to themselves, present to the others, and present in prayer. God did the rest.

Now we're given no detail in terms of the conversation that took place, or the actual prayers that were said, but Lydia and her family were baptized, presumably that very day and her response to the experience was to offer hospitality: she invited the disciples to come and stay in her home. And they did. "She prevailed upon them" the story says.

And so I want to say that that conversation, that whole encounter must have reflected something of what Jesus was getting at in the gospel passage. There was peace given and shared – at the river and in Lydia's home too. And so I also want to say that this is actually an evangelistic story that even Episcopalians can swallow and perhaps emulate. While it's possible that the disciples scared Lydia out of her wits in order to baptize her, there's no sense of that here. No coercion. No threats. No games. No "targets." This is a story with peace at its heart and hospitality as one of its outcomes. A vision led the disciples to a place. While they were there they prayed and talked about their journey and their path crossed a woman's who was on a journey too. After listening with an open heart, she received something of grace from what they said and she was baptized. And then the disciples listened to her, received her gift of hospitality and stayed as guests in her home. And so went the sharing of the good news.

As we approach Ascension and Pentecost, and actually at any time, this is who we can be. The people in this story embodied Christ's gift of peace and allowed their journeys to intersect those of others down by the rivers they shared. We can be the disciples: a prayerful, non-anxious, presence, confident in God's provisions and visions, not afraid to keep and to share the faith that is in us. And we can be Lydia too, we need to be Lydia too – a people whose hearts remain open to a growing faith whatever that means for us, a people who "listen eagerly" and are attentive to the prayers of others. A people whose household remains open to offer hospitality and peace to the travelers who come our way.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid," Jesus said. All shall be well. Peace I give to you, my own peace I leave with you."

Amen.