



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Peace, Love, and Spirit

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 9, 2010

Easter 6 (Year C)

**John 14:23-29**

### John 14:23-29

*Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.*

*"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, 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. 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. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.*

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I have to imagine that every once in a while the disciples got incredibly frustrated with Jesus. Like during today's reading. After all, at this point in John's story it's Thursday night, on the eve of the crucifixion, and Jesus has just told the disciples two disturbing things. First, he's told them that he's going away, and second, where he's going, they can't follow him. As if that wasn't hard enough to bear, Jesus then offers what seems impossible, especially given what they've just been told: "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And I'm guessing their reaction was the first century equivalent of, "You've got to be kidding!"

Or maybe that's just my twenty-first century reaction. Do not let our hearts be troubled? Are you kidding? Look around! Economic woes. People out of work. A seemingly endless war in the Middle East. Churches in conflict just about everywhere you look. Political fights over immigration, over health care, over the reform of our financial system. Oil spills. Bomb threats in New York and other cities. Floods throughout Tennessee, as well as other natural disasters around the world. And yet we're not supposed to be troubled? For crying out loud, Jesus, what's *not* in trouble?

This is what makes Jesus' promise of peace difficult to understand. Peace is just

what it feels like we're missing right now. Peace, after all, would mean the end of all this conflict, the absence of all this turmoil, the conclusion of all our waiting and wanting and worrying. Right? Isn't that how we tend to think about peace?

But I wonder. I mean, I've usually thought of peace that way—as the absence of something negative – the absence of war, or strife, or fear, or anger. And, if you look it up, the first definition in the dictionary seems to confirm this view: "peace: freedom from disturbance."

But it occurs to me on reading and re-reading Jesus' words to the disciples that maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe peace isn't an absence of something, but instead is its own presence. Maybe peace *is* something, all on its own. Maybe it creates something positive, makes something wonderful possible, making it not just the absence of something negative. Maybe this is what Jesus means by saying, "My peace I give to you. I do not give it as the world gives."

If that's so – if I'm willing, that is, to question the way I usually think about peace – then maybe I should also call into question my sense of faith more generally. I think I tend to operate with a sense that our human problem is that we have within us a need, an awareness of our lack, a restlessness, a hole. Saint Augustine once wrote a now-familiar prayer along these very lines. He prayed, "My heart is restless, O God, until it rests in thee." Actually, I think that's pretty accurate. But I suspect that along with that picture of our human condition comes another picture—a picture of how God responds. That is the picture of how God fills that hole, meets that need, fills in what we lack.

Of course, while I believe that's true, I don't think it works like magic. In other words, I don't think that means that once we come to faith everything is suddenly perfect, that we're no longer aware of our need or lack or hurt or brokenness. Or, at least if I'm honest, that's not how I actually experience the life of faith.

Do you know what I mean? Faith, when I think about it, doesn't so much take away all the difficult things in life as it makes those difficult things bearable. It's actually a little more than that. Faith doesn't take away the difficult things in life; it just keeps them from dominating, from having mastery, from defining who I am and the possibilities around me. It's like these things – our needs, our wants, our broken places – they still are accurate *descriptions* of us, at least parts of us, but they no longer *define* us. We are more than what's missing. We are, as other parts of the New Testament make clear, a new creation. And faith makes this possible. Faith understood not as some divine plug for the hole we each carry around inside of us, but rather as a call to be more, to live and love more, to share more because there is so much more that God desires and designed for us.

I suspect, on the whole, that there are probably two views of the religious life. Both agree that this world we share is full of trials and challenges, of sometimes seismic ups and downs. One view of the life of faith assumes that when you come to faith, things settle down, stop shaking, and suddenly make sense. The other view of faith, however,

doesn't promise an end to the shaking but enables you to keep your footing while it's happening.

I think it's that second view of faith that Jesus is talking about. After all, the Spirit he promises comes as the Advocate – the one who takes to our defense when we're accused – and the Comforter – the one who will not leave our side during trouble. Understood that way, there is nothing about Jesus' words that would suggest either that he's promising us an end to problems or that he's inviting us to ignore them. Rather, he promises *peace* – not merely the end of conflict but instead a confident expectation and hope about the future even in the midst of trying times.

There's a quotation that has long been attributed to Martin Luther, but it's more likely that it was actually spoken by Stephen Girard. When Girard was asked what he would do if he thought the world would end tomorrow, he replied, "I would plant a tree today." That's not optimism, but hope; not simply a lack of fear, but courage; not only the absence of disturbance, but peace – Jesus' peace, a peace the world cannot give.

You've got your own worries this week—whether they come from home, work, or the world—or even from inside of yourself. But you also have the promise that you are not alone. What Jesus did for the disciples, the Holy Spirit—our Comforter, our Advocate—will do for us. In other words, even in a broken and fearful world, the Spirit will give us courage and will empower us to serve Christ in our daily lives, and strengthen us to live holy and joyful lives. May the Spirit who comes to us as the One sent by the Father and the Son grant us peace, now and forever. Amen.

And now, let us stand together to affirm what we believe:

***We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.  
The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,  
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,  
and binds us together with all believers  
in the one body of Christ, the church.  
The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,  
engages us through the Word proclaimed,  
claims us in the waters of baptism,  
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,  
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.  
In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,***

*to unmask idolatries in church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"  
With believers in every time and place,  
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death  
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*