

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
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The Dangerous Peace of God

This Saturday, I'm leading a retreat entitled "Practicing the Presence of God." The retreat is about prayer, but about a particular kind of prayer. In our time together we will think about what it means to be simply open to God—not to have much to say—to have little to do—but to simply be open. It's a kind of prayer that recognizes that prayer, as a whole, is about a conversation—our conversation with God. On Saturday, we'll focus on the part of the conversation where we sit in quiet, listening---that's a key to any good conversation—that we listen to the other---so in silence, we sit and listen to God.

I call this practicing God's presence because our goal is to open ourselves to God in our time of prayer—to become more aware of God and God's grace in all that is around us, so that we can carry this sense of God's presence with us as we make our way through the busyness and trials of our days. This is something I talked about with the search committee and that I'm bringing up in the coffees that I've been leading in the past few weeks. I've heard so many folks talk about the overwhelming busyness of their lives here, and about the gift of this place—that it's an oasis in the midst of that busyness. Here you can come and just be with folks who will love and appreciate you. This is a warm place. It's a place where God is palpably present in that warmth and love. I'm convinced that the oasis of presence that you experience here—that you can carry it with you—that it can be your constant companion, if you can learn to open yourselves to that presence---if you will practice that presence, so that it becomes habit. That's what we do in a regular practice of prayer....

So that's the preamble to my sermon---and now you're wondering just how long of a sermon I plan on preaching on a holiday weekend. It's the preamble, because, having said all of that, I want to make sure that I don't mislead you about what you get with openness to God. As I've talked about the gift of this openness, I've talked about finding an oasis within us---and visions of interior Bahamian vacations might appear—and trips to the Bahamas, within or without, are always good things. And this image points us in the right direction—that with a practice of daily prayers of quiet, we do win for ourselves a certain peace---we find our way to God's peace---that's what I mean when I use this metaphor of oasis---that's why we call this place an oasis---it's a place where we find a certain peace.... But, having said that, we must be clear what we mean by peace.

Peace is a funny word. When we talk about peace, we usually mean simply a cessation of hostility, or activity. Peace means we're not at war, or that things are quiet and calm—not overly loud or busy, and there is something of that quietness to peace. But you must have heard that peace, at least in Scripture—the Hebrew, *shalom*, means more than just quiet--it means wholeness, fullness---the peace that God promises in Scripture is a peace of fulfillment---there is a richness to the term---that's what makes it apt to describe what we have here at St. Thomas---this is a place of peace not because it's quiet---you only have to notice the children running around at coffee hour to be disabused of that---no, this is a

place of peace because it's a place of wholeness---of friendship, and service, and love, and compassion---To understand the peace that we find in prayer, we must get this richer sense. Of course, the image of the vacation in the Bahamas still captures this---you just have to include friends and family and good food.

So far so good, and if that's the prayer that I'm inviting you to on Saturday—a perpetual interior vacation in the Bahamas---well, now, that's a deal. But there is another dimension to God's peace—another dimension of the reality into which you're invited with prayer---it's the dimension that we'll sing about in our final hymn---it's a hymn taken from a prayer attributed to St. Francis (though the prayer is actually much older)---you know the prayer---Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love, where there is discord, union, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light. It's a prayer that is clear about the power of peace---that peace is able to transform our world---it's able to enter into the darkness, despair, hatred and violence of the world, and bring a wholeness to that, a grace that transforms places of death into places of life. There's an energy to God's peace and a connection of that peace to the darkness of our world. It's a peace that doesn't just lay on the beach, but that takes the Bahamas and places it smack in the middle of Iraq. It's a peace that doesn't flee the world, but embraces the world in all of its ugliness and seeks to transform it.

You can start to see why I feel a need to warn you about Saturday's retreat, and about prayer. Yes, I'm inviting you to seek an interior oasis—to go the Bahamas—but now it turns out that the trip to the Bahamas is really a bootcamp, preparing you for Iraq. But then, I guess the point is that we're already trapped in the turmoil of the world---we are already overwhelmed by the noise, the busyness, the violence, the death that threatens to tear us apart. What we need to know about prayer is that it doesn't remove us from this world---it just gives us the resources to deal with it---it gives us an energetic peace that will allow—or maybe compel us to be signs of grace in the midst of the strife. Okay, still so far so good.

But there's one last dimension to this, and this is where it gets so tricky. At Rob's funeral, we sang one of the more powerful hymns in the hymnal---hymn 661—They cast their nets in Galilee---it's a hymn about the peaceful life lived by these fisherman in Galilee until they met Jesus. It's about the life to which Jesus called them---lives in which they died the deaths of martyrs, or exiles for the sake of the Gospel----this is the peace of God, the hymn says---it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Walter and I were afraid that the hymn was too much for that service, but Barbara was certain that it was the right thing---and it spoke to us powerfully---that God's peace doesn't stand outside of death—but is in the midst of it---that it can even lead to our death---and it's this power of peace, leading to and born out of death, that allows it to transform the hatred, the violence, the darkness of our world into grace. God's peace is not afraid of the darkness, because it is forged there.

This is what I need to warn you about prayer---that real prayer of quiet---real prayer of openness to God---this is a prayer that takes us to dangerous places—it's a prayer that is comfortable with death---and it's this comfort with death, with darkness, that allows it to

be a prayer of life and peace. What do I mean? Well, last week, I talked about the challenge we have to be compassionate with ourselves. It was the challenge to join God, who is willing to dwell in us, in our souls in their darkest moments, and to just be there with the suffering, so that the suffering doesn't happen alone. We have compassion with ourselves when we're willing to join God in that quiet place, with our suffering, so that we bear it with God—we don't force God to bear it alone.

That's what happens in quiet prayer. In quiet prayer, we make space for ourselves from all of the noise, all of the busyness, all of the things that we have to do---the things with which we distract ourselves so that we don't have to face what really is. Thich Nhat Hanh tell us that in silent prayer, we're able to "look deeply at life as it is in the here and now," and we need to be clear that this is a radical thing. We don't want to see and feel a lot of life—it is too hard, too painful. We especially want to avoid our own pain, our own weaknesses, our own shortcomings that makes us ashamed. We want to pretend that they aren't there, and so we stay busy to distract ourselves from them. To pray, then, is an act of courage---it is an act whereby we find space for quiet, so that we can face these interior demons, and discover that they won't overcome us.

In the Lord of the Rings, Gandalf, the mighty wizard, leads a group of travelers into the depths of a great mine, and there he finds a hideous monster of the underworld, a balrog, whom he battles to save the group. In the end, he casts the monster down into a fiery pit, but the monster grabs his ankle and drags Gandalf with him, and that, we think, is the end of Gandalf. The monster, if you will, is his interior demons, and he is forced to face them, and he's overcome. But in the next book, Gandalf is revealed alive, more brilliant and more powerful than before, because he did face his inner darkness, and he wasn't overcome, but was made stronger through it.

In quiet prayer, we face our inner darkness, our inner pain, our inner despair and misgivings about our own capabilities. But here's the thing—we face them not to battle them and overcome them. We face them just to be with them, there in the silence. In the silence, we discover that they are a part of us, and we are a part of them---but we also discover that God is with us even there---that God is with us in the suffering, the weakness, the addiction, the darkness---and because God is with us, we can be there, and it's all right. It's a place of peace---it's a place of wholeness.

In quiet prayer, if we truly make space for what is---then we begin with a simple sense of peace and quiet, and that is good. But soon that dissipates, and we find ourselves alone with ourselves and with God---and that, quite frankly, is scary. It is the peace that is no peace, in the words of the hymn. But if we allow ourselves to stay there—to dwell with compassion in the dark and silent spaces within us, then we will find there the peace that is truly peace---the peace that can face the darkness of the world, because we are comfortable with our own darkness. It's a peace that knows God's presence even in the midst of the darkness, so that even in the darkness there is light. I'm guessing this is all a little obscure right now, but I hope that I've given you at least a little sense of how I understand prayer and the retreat this Saturday. I hope as well that you will take some

time to explore this sense of prayer, and to find the peace that's born of it. Amen.