

Advent 2020



Home Alone?

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John 14:23-27

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Today in the sermon, I will address race relations in our country. Our elders have been in extended conversation with members of our Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing. Session wrote a statement on race, a statement I support as a way of engaging our church on racial issues. You can find this statement on our website.

Our theme during Advent this year is *What the World Needs Now*. Last Sunday's focus was *hope*. Today's emphasis is *peace*. Tell me we don't need peace right now! My original plan was to preach on the angelic announcement in Luke of a Savior to bring peace to the world. I decided instead to preach on a portion of John 14. Why? I like John 14 a lot! Every time, I read Jesus' words, "Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give to you," a sense of calm comes over me. I want the peace Jesus offers.

²³ Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

²⁵ "All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:23-27).

Our daughter, Emily, and family watched the movie *Home Alone* last weekend. I had almost forgotten about this 30-year old movie. It's a story about an eight-year old boy named Kevin whose family leaves on a vacation to Paris. The electricity goes out in their home the night before they depart, causing the family to oversleep their alarms. In their haste to make it to the airport on time, they accidentally leave Kevin home alone.

It's a funny movie, yet in real life there's nothing funny about being left alone. Jesus' disciples are afraid of being left alone in today's story. Jesus has just announced his abrupt departure. His parting words in our lesson are included in a section of John's gospel called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is working with his disciples to understand two seemingly conflicting ideas. First, that he is leaving them and second, that he is not leaving them "home alone."

Jesus reassures his disciples at the outset of today's reading, "My Father and I will make our home with them," meaning his disciples (John 14:23). It's the same idea Jesus communicates earlier in John 14, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). Our home is with God and his Son, Jesus.

Jesus will never leave his disciples home alone. Although he is leaving them, he promises his presence will remain with them. "All this I have spoken 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 all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). The Greek word translated Advocate is *Paraclete*. Spellcheck keeps reverting to the word "parakeet." A Paraclete is not a little yellow bird in a cage.

It literally means “called to one’s side.” It’s a legal term, much like defense attorneys who advocate on behalf of their clients. Paraclete is variously translated as Advocate, Helper, or Counselor in John 14.

Jesus has not left us home alone. He has given us his abiding presence, the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate. While Satan is depicted in Scripture as our accuser (Revelation 10:12), God sends Jesus to be our Advocate.

Jesus then announces, “Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Four qualities of Jesus’ peace stand out to me in this single verse.

First, Jesus’ peace is the promise of his real presence. “Peace, **I** leave with you; **my** peace **I** give to you.” Jesus offers my peace, my presence, my paraclete.

Second, Jesus’ peace is different from anything the world offers. “I do not give to you as the world gives.” The Roman Empire for 200 years (27BC to 180AD) was governed by *Pax Romana*, Latin for “Roman peace.” It was a period of relative peace in the empire. Yet peace is misleading, since *Pax Romana* was a military-imposed peace. The emperor’s methods of achieving peace were cruel and brutal. Peace existed primarily because the government squashed all dissent. Jesus’ peace is not merely the absence of conflict. It is not dependent on external circumstances. Jesus’ peace comes to us regardless of what is happening in the outside world.

Third, Jesus' peace can calm our troubled, fearful hearts. "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." You may feel troubled or fearful right now. Let me remind you of something I've said in previous sermons. Our feelings are not the truest measure of God's presence in our lives. What God promises in his Word is the truest indicator of God's presence with us.

Fourth, Jesus' peace is something shared among people. Every reference to you in this verse is plural, "Peace, I leave you; my peace I give you." The peace Jesus gives is not merely private and personal. It is meant to be shared with people.

This week I came across a sermon that Martin Luther King preached in 1956 at a Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama. The title of King's sermon, *When Peace Becomes Obnoxious* peaked my curiosity. It was preached in the aftermath of race riots at the University of Alabama. Autherine Lucy was the first African American student admitted to the university. After riots broke out, the university rescinded her admission. The headlines read the next day, "Today, there is peace at the University of Alabama." King preached that the peace Jesus brings is not complacency or peace at any price. Peace has the courage to face real issues in life. King insisted that Jesus' peace is not "merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion but the promise of some positive force—justice, good will and the kingdom of God." Peace is not only the absence of conflict. Peace is Jesus' presence, his good will, his Kingdom presence.

So what difference does this sermon on peace make in my life? I have two applications to offer you. One addresses race. The other speaks to home and family.

My first application concerns racial tensions in our country. We have reached a virtual tipping point over race relations in America. Some of you may regard my decision now to speak about race as passé. Wasn't race something we talked about last summer? Do not be lulled to sleep by the temporary respite. Until we deal head-on with racial tensions in our country, it's going to erupt again soon enough.

Let's start at the beginning with the book of Genesis. Racism is an affront to God. God created us in multi-colored splendor. Everyone is fashioned in God's image with worth and dignity. God does not play favorites with people.

Racism, like any other sin against God must be acknowledged and confessed. Scripture calls us to repent of any violation of God's two great commands about loving God and neighbor. Racism is not always obvious to us. More often, it is subtle and insidious. Scripture directs me to start with me when it comes to confession. Where is there racism in me? I begin with me just as you begin with you.

Sin is both corporate as well as individual in the Bible. The language of "systemic racism" has become a flashpoint in American culture. No doubt, because the phrase has become highly politicized. Why are we so resistant to the notion that society supports the dominant racial group? We see this tendency repeatedly in human history.

Where do we go from here? Search the Scripture. I wrote earlier this year in a *Letter on Race* that the Bible is a treasure trove of material on topics related to race.

My other suggestion is to listen. People of color have found their voice to speak candidly and openly about race right now. We would do well to listen. I mean, really listen. Listening sounds so simple. It's not as easy as it seems.

We speak, on average 140 words per minute yet our brains are capable of processing 400 words a minute. This means when someone is speaking, we can rush ahead while the person is speaking to formulate a response or mount a defense. Thereby, we miss what the other person is telling us. I'm advocating for the Biblical practice of deep listening. James writes, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

Let's stop pretending we understand, and listen. We are so resistant to the idea there may be racism in us that we sabotage conversation with subterfuge and excuses.

There are lots of opportunities for dialogue right now. Every Friday noon we host a Zoom call on race. Our Great Banquet community leads a series titled *Difficult Conversations on Race*. Our Christ and Culture Learning Community will resume their discussion on race in January. Our newly formed Ministry for Racial Reconciliation and Healing invites you to a dialogue on these issues. In early January, our church will co-sponsor, with First Baptist Church, Dr. Nicole Martin to help us engage the issues.

We have one distinct advantage as followers of Jesus Christ. We have Jesus' presence, his peace to help us arbitrate a deep and lasting peace.

My second application concerns peace in the home. Everyone's living situation is challenging right now. Those of you living alone are likely feeling more isolated. Those in families are not used to this much together time. It's easier to ignore conflict when the bulk of your time is spent elsewhere. Now, you are confined 24/7 to small living spaces with little or no reprieve. This much together time can shine a spotlight on relational challenges in your family.

Let me speak for a moment to those of you who are married. If you struggled in your marriage before COVID, it's likely to be worse now. For couples who enjoy a healthy relationship, this pandemic could bring you closer together. For couples who don't communicate well or do not share the same values, this pandemic could be driving a wedge between you.

I spoke earlier about the value of active listening. Listening is critical to a healthy marriage. There is a qualitative difference between hearing and listening. *Listening* is wanting to hear.

Most of us aren't good listeners. We hear selectively. We hear what we want to hear and tune out what we don't like. We talk past each other. Put down your smartphones and the TV remote to listen. Listening is a learned behavior, an acquired skill. Research "active listening" on the internet if you want to know more. Ask for God's help in becoming a better listener.

Some of you need to attend to your marriage right now. Name the struggle and talk about it. Ask for help. Contact our pastoral staff for assistance. Reach out to our Marriage Ministry. Invite Jesus' presence in your home life in a whole new way.

Jesus will never leave his followers home alone. "Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).