

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15
St. Mark's on the Campus
August 20, 2006

As I prepared for this morning, I found myself returning again and again to that one phrase in our psalm, "Seek *peace* and pursue *it*." No doubt I found myself returning to it in part because I, like you, have watched over the last several weeks as Israel and Hezbollah have been warring with one another. It sometimes seems as if peace is the *last* thing we human beings seek; sometimes it seems that we humans are more intent on seeking conflict rather than passionate about seeking peace.

Seek peace. And pursue it. Another translation says, "Embrace peace – don't let it get away!"

This morning's gospel, and our music, and our reading from Proverbs all have themes that are deeply Eucharistic. Do they have anything at all to do with seeking peace, with not letting it get away?

One way of interpreting this morning's gospel would be to say, sure, it promises peace to us as individuals: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." And yes, a profound peace does move in our individual hearts when we dwell in Christ.

But living with inner peace as individuals can't be separated from our communal reality. Some of you will have heard a radio segment that I also heard earlier this week on NPR. A man I believe was an Iraqi journalist was being interviewed. He is Shiite Muslim and his wife and children are Sunni Muslim; in one sense they are the reality of God's kingdom in

which the lion and the lamb, enemies in some circumstances, lie down with one another and create a new, peaceful reality.

However, this man was talking about how for reasons of safety, he and his family have had to separate. His family has been torn apart by the continuing conflict in Iraq. You could hear the torture in his voice as he told his interviewer, “All I can say is, ‘God, make vengeance for me.’” God, make vengeance for me.

I was reminded how profoundly our inner peace was disturbed almost five years ago on 9/11, and how we were drawn together as a country in our differences because of what we perceived as a common enemy.

For *all* humanity, individual peace is never very far from corporate peace. They go hand in hand, and both are deeply connected to God; for Christians, that is God as revealed to the world in Jesus: by one who “makes vengeance” by taking evil onto himself and transforming it; by absorbing death itself and resurrecting it into new life.

Dwelling in Christ means that you and I strive to live as mirrors of all that He does, to proclaim with our lives the paschal mystery of death being transformed into life by the sacrificial offering of our own lives. In *some* circumstances that translates into a physical offering of our bodies; in *all* circumstances it translates into an offering of our selves in all the other ways of life: our money, our time, our work, our service, our devotion.

Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we commemorate the death of Jesus until he comes. *His* death, as he depends not on himself but on God. His death is the reality in which we participate; it’s the reality we pray that our lives will reflect; it’s what it means to dwell in Christ: that we strive to live the love that he lives, the love that proclaims to us and to the

world: “Here I am, broken for you. Here is my blood, poured out for you.” This is my life offered for *you*. Each time we reach out our hands and become one with Christ our Lord, we ask to receive that life, and we pray that we may be empowered to be one with that sacrifice in the things that *we* do, too, in the lives we offer in return.

When we use Rite 1, we often use a blessing that begins, “The peace of God which passes all understanding” The peace of Jesus, like all the truest realities of life, is not figured out from some objective distance; it’s lived into, made real in the costly flesh and blood of daily life. The peace of Jesus is both the most individual *and* most corporate reality of life.

When we know peace at all, we know it deep within our selves where our soul meets other souls; where we know that we live connected with and not separated from everything else that exists; where we know that *communion* is more than a word or a nice thing on Sunday morning: it’s the very reality of existence, and we either live into that reality and know the peace of Christ—or we don’t truly live.

The peace of Christ emerges only as a gift from the heart: a gift from us to others, from others to us, and above all, from the heart of God to all of us.

Peace is the way of Jesus. It’s not just something we receive; it’s something we dwell in, live in, *participate* in—as increasingly we dwell in communion with Jesus.

As part of a Doctor of Ministry degree, one completes a project with a local congregation. The focus of my own degree was Eucharistic theology, and the lucky folks of my parish outside of Cleveland, Ohio got to help me with my project. As part of that thesis, I asked them complete a survey about their own beliefs regarding Holy Communion. I remember

how surprised I was that a full third of them believed that what we do each week is only a memorial meal.

Now it's true that we Anglicans don't get into doctrinal definitions about the Eucharist, but we *do* say things like "Christ is truly present in the Eucharist," and that the grace of God is conveyed through this sacrament.

We believe that this meal is not just about some distant memory of something that took place two thousand years ago. It's about what Christ is doing for the world at this moment, and what *we* are doing in offering our lives to God at this table, the *many* ways in which we offer our lives so that they might be touched by the mighty power of God's Spirit. We believe that God acts in this simple and profound meal to renew us, to change us, and to keep us. When we reach out to receive the bread and the wine – those signs of our lives which we have offered and over which we have prayed -- we believe that God is present, and that God is offering back to us far more than anything we could first have offered: a peace that belongs to God, a peace that exists only as it is lived out, as Jesus did, and as Jesus does.

As you come forward this morning to receive the bread and wine, look ahead in hope, deep and lasting and costly hope for the peace of God in this world; look ahead knowing that Christ is working for peace in your heart and throughout this world – and that today Christ is calling *you* to be a part of that peace.

Receive that peace that does indeed pass all understanding.

Participate in it as fully as God is calling you.

Seek Christ's peace; *pursue* Christ's peace; *embrace* Christ's peace.

And never, never let it go.