

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, May 15, 2016**  
**Text: Romans 8:14-17; John 14:15-17, 25-27**

# The Peace of Presence



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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When I played high school basketball my mom and dad attended every game, home and away. Not that I played much . . . I was the twelfth man on a ten-man team, seldom playing and occasionally left off of the traveling squad. But one Friday night at McHenry I played the entire game and guarded Paul Morenz, the conference's leading scorer. In that game, as I remember, he scored forty-four points, very near his average; I scored one.

Eventually, he came to the University of Wisconsin to play basketball. I saw him one day on Bascom Hill and stopped him to say, "Paul, you may not remember me, but I guarded you the night that Libertyville played McHenry. You and I combined for forty-five points."

He did not seem to remember, but I did. But what I remember most, and why I recall it today, is that my mom and dad were there. They always were there, not judging, not critiquing, perhaps cheering one free throw at a time, but most important to me, they were present. The peace of their presence still empowers me even today, though they died a few decades ago.

The peace of presence . . . I trust that sometimes God's spirit comes to us not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in the still small voice, even when no words are spoken.

When I was in seminary I had a classmate named Larry who suffered an unspeakable loss. Larry was a former Roman Catholic priest who left the priesthood, got married, and returned to seminary to prepare for ministry in a Protestant tradition. His wife and he had an adorable child who, when he was three years old, was riding his tricycle on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building when he was run over by a drunk driver and killed.

The supervising pastor for my field work, Lowell Johnson, and I went to their apartment to express our sorrow to Larry and his wife. As Lowell drove to the address, all I could think of was, "What can I say? What will bring any comfort? Here I am, training for a lifetime of offering pastoral care, and I have no idea what to say." I practiced various words and phrases silently as I sat in the passenger seat, but nothing seemed adequate.

We arrived and found, as we had expected, that the apartment was filled with others from the seminary who were present to support the grieving couple. I saw Larry standing in the middle of the living room, walked slowly toward him, still trying to think of what to say. He turned and saw me and immediately gave me a big hug. He was a big man who enveloped me in his grasp. I tried to say something, but nothing came out of my mouth. No words . . . no words could express the sorrow. I tried desperately to think of something to say – nothing.

That was it. Not long after that hug Lowell and I left; there was nothing more to do. On the ride back to the seminary all I could think was, "How inadequate can you be, Blackwell? Here is a father who has just lost a son in a terrible death, and you cannot even utter a word of comfort? And what is it that you think you are going to do for the rest of your life, be a pastor?"

About two weeks later Larry was back in class. Afterward he stopped me at the classroom door and said to me, "Phil, thank you for what you said that night. I will never forget it; it made all the difference in the world."

What I said! I had said nothing, to my own disgrace, but unbeknownst to me, God was speaking in that still small voice, not even using my words. The peaceful presence of the Holy Spirit speaks when we are at a loss for words, and healing can take place, in spite of ourselves.

Parker Palmer lives in Madison. Parker is well-known in certain circles, a sociologist who writes and speaks about the human spirit, especially as it is evident in the educational realm, the medical world, and religious life. I understand that he has spoken here at First Church and that his books have been the focus of discussion groups.

Parker has been brave in publicly sharing his disabling bouts with depression, deep declines into the depths of the human spirit. He has said that at such times it is predictable, but not at all helpful, for people to try to lift his spirits by saying things like, "Oh, don't let it get you down." Hey, Parker, look at the bright side of life." "You've got so much going for you." Or more frontally, "Okay, Parker, that's enough; snap out of it."

He said, "You know what got me out of the last depression I experienced? It was nothing I read, nothing I did, nothing that was said to me. But my neighbor, knowing of my need, came over every morning and silently, lovingly, massaged my feet. No advice, no thought for the day, just the gentle touching of my feet."

I thought of that yesterday when I was here at First Church and looked in on the foot clinic downstairs. Here were medical personnel washing the feet of people who had been walking all week in ill-fitting shoes, wearing the same pair of socks, nowhere to sit long enough to take the weight off their feet. But now they sat and felt the warmth of the water, the

smoothness of the soap, and the gentle touch of a human hand, and they were smiling, every one of them, the ones seated and the ones kneeling. And then, they were in the care of the podiatrists for any specific problems.

Looking from our particular religious perspective, we can affirm that the peaceful presence of God's Holy Spirit was in this place, in those hands.

We usually portray the Holy Spirit descending as if the flames of an energizing fire, and heaven knows, the Church needs the fire of God's love and goodness and justice and mercy in order to make a difference in the world. The symbol for the United Methodist Church is the cross and flame, and certainly that radical inspiration is needed in our denomination right this day as over 800 delegates meet to make decisions at the General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

But not all fires are bonfires. During my seminary intern year when Sally and I lived in our manse in Wolverhampton, England, just north of Birmingham, we had no central heat. No one in the council housing estate had central heat. No, we needed to learn how to keep a coal fire going all night to provide a bit of heat to the house and a few litres of hot water for the morning. Sometimes the fire needs to be constant, not a momentary conflagration that soon goes cold. Sometimes the Holy Spirit needs to be like the other traditional image, the dove that glides down from above. It is not depicted as a red-winged blackbird dive-bombing to protect its nest, but as a dove quietly descending upon us as a peaceful presence of God's spirit.

In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus promising to the disciples that God will grant them . . . what? An "advocate," some translations say; others say "comforter;" still others use the word, "companion." This Spirit of Truth comes to us so that we might love one another, Jesus says, so that we will not be constantly troubled and afraid. What a concept, a concept for the world to hear, and more than hear, to see. From the General Conference to our own congregation, from the world's turmoil to our own political spectacle, God sets us free from fear so that we can love one another as part of God's human family. On Pentecost we celebrate the peaceful presence of God's love in our midst.

That is what we read at the beginning of our worship service in the responsive Call to Worship. Okay, it does not sound so peaceful as Luke records the second chapter of The Acts of the Apostles. It was noisy at first when all who are gathered in Jerusalem on that day, people from every known clan and tribe in the world going about business as usual in this international city of trade, experience some sort of in-break of a spirit that instantaneously forms them into one community. Luke says that people who are speaking all sorts of native languages suddenly begin to understand one another. It is not that they all begin to speak the same language, but they began to understand . . . Jews, Gentiles, Arabs, Asians, and Africans. And Peter begins to interpret for them what is happening, that God's spirit, the Spirit of Truth, is among them so that they might see visions and dream dreams together.

And thematically, what does this pentecostal moment reverse? The curse of Genesis 11. Remember that the people of that olden day were intending to storm heaven via a tower they were constructing, but they were stymied when their common language mutated into several languages, and they could not cooperate in usurping God's domain. In the conceit of trying to ascend to heaven, they descended into gibberish, into babble, as their Tower of Babel collapsed.

The Spirit of Truth that God confers upon all of humanity reverses all of that. The Companion brings the peaceful presence of understanding to comfort all of the people in their new-found understanding of, and appreciation for, one another, even in the midst of their differences.

That is the power of this spirit-inspired day: the power to overcome fear, the power to be free, and at the same time, the power to be intimately connected with one another. It is the power of peace that is present among us, even when we cannot find words to express it. Amen.