Lenten Sermon 2: The Sign of Peace: John 14:27, 1958

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THE SIGN OF PEACE

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

About forty years have come and gone since America paused for a moment to bury in the National Cemetery at Arlington the body of the Unknown Soldier. Lost and forgotten in life he was to become in death a perpetual symbol of the world’s hope and a silent messenger of the world’s peace. Near his tomb men placed an eternal light so that his memory might live in the grateful hearts of his countrymen. Today, forty years later, the dim and grim shadow of irony surrounds that light. Certainly we do not live in a world of peace. Today, forty years after the body of the Unknown Soldier found its last resting place, it looks as though he had died in vain. The world is haunted with fear and the horizons of humanity are red with blood.

It is therefore vitally necessary for us to turn again and again to an old and yet ever new peace. It is interesting to note how often our Lord used that little word, how often it appears in the story of His visit with us from Bethlehem to the final hill in Galilee, how it rings like a tolling bell especially through His Maundy Thursday sermon and His high priestly prayer. "Peace I leave with you" — this is finally the end of all He said and did for us! This is what He wanted us to have by His obedient life and atoning death.

Today we may well pause to inquire into the reasons for the world's loss of God's peace. Why do men hate each other? Why do the councils of the great of the earth calmly proceed to plan the killing of their fellowmen? To answer these questions in terms of the demands for trade and territory, in terms of the personality of our leaders, in terms of the lust for power, does not strike at the heart of our problem. The answer is at the same time
are still here -- the old envies -- the old vanities -- the old fears --
the stark and grim reality of the sin-stricken heart of man.

If you go out into nature at dusk you will find that trees, stones and hills cast shadows which are out of all proportion to the realities of the world and which will give you, if you attend only to them, a grotesque and utterly unreal picture of the realities behind these shadows. Something like that happens in the history of men with fearful regularity. Under the accumulated burden of fear upon fear and shame upon shame the eyes of men turn down and down and deeper down until they see only the shadows of the realities of God, the shadows which persuade them that momentary panaceas and temporary plans and endless conferences are going to heal the world's pain and turn away the world's ruin. There is no permanent hope in this. All the history of men and all the experience of the human heart is against it.

You cannot heal a cancer by covering it with bandages. You cannot remove hate and fear and despair from the heart of the world by conducting some summit conferences. You may postpone its final result. But the realities are still here -- the old envies -- the old vanities -- the old fears -- the stark and grim reality of the sin-stricken heart of man -- man who will hate and destroy and kill because there is no peace in his own heart.

Our Lord therefore speaks this Lenten season with particular force to the heart of the modern world: "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you." There is the answer, -- the only answer which can stand up in the light of eternity. This is the peace which our Lord fills with a heavenly meaning. This is the peace which we can see in its full glory only under the shadow of the Cross to which we have brought our warring and restless hearts. This is the peace with God through the atonement of the Cross; peace wrought through the sanctifying power of God, the Holy Spirit; peace in a world that is without peace.
This is the only answer to the world's problems which can stand up in the light of eternity. Today it is time for more of us to see it clearly before it is too late. Much has happened in the world since the Unknown Soldier was laid to rest. But nothing has come over our days and our years which would shake the deep and consuming conviction that today as seldom before the world must wait, not for the man of the hour or the program of the moment — but for the God of the eternities and the plan of the ages. We have looked around for help. Now it is time to look up. We have tried to plan a new world. Now it is time to plan a new life. We have asked ourselves what we want. Now it is time to ask what God wants. Far more than pacts and treaties we need today the new promise of an old peace—the voice of the Eternal pouring itself into the agony of life without God—the last hope of a generation driven to its knees by the overwhelming realization that it has nowhere else to go: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you."

There it is! The peace of the Cross! Here is the profoundest need of our age. Often we may not be able to put it into words, but we know it in our hearts as we know nothing else. Some years ago Bertrand Russell summed it up in the following words: "Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark. For him, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish ere yet the blow falls the few hopes that ennoble his little life." I cannot see how men can live and die on that. There must be something which will make them glad and sure again; something to tell them that their brief mortal life has immortal meaning, something which will substitute for their deep dismay a peace and an understanding which the voices of despair and doubt can
never give.

And the answer to this profound need lies in the simple words: "My peace I leave with you." On these words rest the last unity of the human heart which it, unaided and alone, can never know. This is the true peace of the child of God in the Kingdom of God. Peace — the peace which the world cannot give, the peace which comes from the surrendered happy faith in the atoning death of our Lord and Savior, the peace which passes the understanding of men, — that comes and can come only from God. Long ago He gave it to the hearts of men through the obedient life and the atoning death of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Through Him God spoke to the sin-stricken, hateful hearts of men finally and forever: "My peace I leave with you." Yesterday, today and tomorrow this was, is and shall be the peace which men need more bitterly than anything else — the peace of forgiven sin — the peace of a heart redeemed by the blood of the eternal Son of God — the peace which rests forever and forever in the sure knowledge that without the fear of any law or command our hearts rest quiet and still in the God-given spirit/which comes from the Prince of Peace. We cannot remove hate and blood and fear from the world while our hearts are at war with God. We cannot stand united in anything but the most transitory and fleeting concerns of our brief interlude between the eternities, unless and until we stand united in the blessed unity of Heaven, the majestic company of the redeemed of God, bound together by a common hope, a common love and a common faith in Him Who even today holds in His cross-torn hands the last peace of the human heart.

And this peace of the Cross is a very practical peace. While we may be concerned about the problems of the world — and God knows it is bad enough — we must be more immediately concerned about our own personal and individual
problems. We cannot touch our world with the power of the conquering Christ unless we first look to ourselves, unless we view with deep concern any and all evidences which would rob us of the peace of the Cross. Among ourselves we must watch daily for anything that might destroy our deep essential unity in the Cross and leave us afraid and alone in this day of divine winnowing and anger. Our problem may be jealousy, envy, the love of material things, tiredness, restlessness — but whatever it may be we must face it in the peace which comes from Christ and His Cross. We must hear His voice again above all our human weaknesses and failures, above our personal problems, above all that may stand in the way of our becoming better and greater inhabitants of his blessed Kingdom. "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you." Here is the last and ultimate home of the human heart.
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