

## ***As the World Gives***

**John 14:15-21, 25-27**

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We've recently completed a sermon series in which we looked at some of the stained glass windows that adorn this sanctuary, and examined the scripture passages to which they point. It was a wonderful opportunity for all of us to look with fresh eyes upon this space that, for some of us, might be a bit too easily taken for granted.

The more time we spend in a space, the less we tend to actually see the space. Focusing on a particular aspect of this sanctuary gave us all a moment to absorb again the beauty and impact of this remarkable place.

When I have had the opportunity to teach our children about worship, I like to talk to them not just about the elements of the service, but also about this room. I share with them the different names we use for things- pulpit, pew, baptismal font, narthex, and I let them know that this space is unlike any other space that they know.

It is not a gym or a kitchen, not a bedroom or a classroom. It is a sanctuary, a word that comes from the Latin word for holy, and it is a holy space, in that it is the space set aside for our worship of God. That doesn't mean we can't do other things in here, or that we can't worship God anywhere else. It just means that things are a little bit different in here than they are at home or at school, at the mall or on the soccer field.

To be sure, we are invited to bring our whole selves here, and our whole selves are human beings, participants in a culture that exists and thrives and moves and presses on us in countless ways. When we are in this sanctuary, we are never fully removed from our culture and its particularities, but we are invited to turn our focus away from that which is human and toward that which is holy, for at least a little while.

There are times when the intersection of the human and the holy in this space is profound- times when what happens in the world out there comes powerfully into our time in here. This weekend is a good example.

As we gather this morning for worship, we are aware that this is Memorial Day weekend, and so our thoughts go to the men and women who lost their lives serving our country and to those who love them. This afternoon two people will be married in this sanctuary, joyfully committing themselves to one another before God and their family and friends. On Tuesday, members of our church and people from throughout our community will come together to grieve one of our own- a life lost too soon, and to profess our faith that in Jesus Christ, death does not have the last word.

Into this space called holy, we come to celebrate the happiest days and to grieve on our saddest ones, to pour out our concerns to God and to lift our voices in praise. We come with our questions and our doubts, our convictions and our opinions, our anxieties and our fears. We come certain of what to expect and having no idea what we need. We bring what we experience in the world into this space because God first came to us, and invites us into genuine relationship- exactly as we are.

It may seem counterintuitive to some, that the place where we welcome infants into God's family through baptism, celebrate marriages and give thanks for all the joys we experience is the same place where we come to acknowledge our brokenness and our sin, grieve losses and remember that Jesus died for us.

There aren't a lot of other places in our lives where the highs and the lows come together so naturally, and so authentically, as in a sanctuary. This is a holy space, and as such it is a center point around which our lives of faith move- we bring our real selves here when we are happy and sad, certain and uncertain, strong and weak. And the God who created us meets us, as we are.

That can be a challenge sometimes, and we may not always know exactly how to handle it. When the world wants us to put things neatly into boxes- happy things here, tough things there, life has a way of reminding us that it rarely works out that way. And so isn't it a gift to have a space such as this where we can bring our worldly selves to get a glimpse of Jesus' divine love. We don't have to have it all figured out to come here and be with one another in worship- we just need to be, to embrace the gift of God's presence as we experience it in community.

The passage we just read from John's gospel has got to be one of my favorite passages of scripture. It hasn't always been, but as I have lived and experienced the very real challenges that are a part of this human life, I have come to appreciate these words in ways I could not many years ago.

In this passage, Jesus is talking to his disciples, preparing them as best he can for what he knows is coming- his crucifixion. They don't know it, but he will be leaving them soon, and in his great love for them, he wants to get them ready for what he knows will be a very difficult time for them. This is a part of what biblical scholars call Jesus' Final Discourse in John- it is his address to those closest to him, and it is full of love, compassion, and wisdom.

The brief selection we heard this morning is rich with important teaching, as it touches on Christ's commandments, the relationship of the Trinity, and eternal life. Each time I read it, I feel like I gain some new perspective.

Recently, the words that have resonated with me the most in this passage are these: "I do not give to you as the world gives."

For a long time, I must confess, I have glossed over those words, moving from the words of peace to "do not be afraid." Because those words are obviously words of comfort, I have clung to them in many times of sadness and confusion. But recently I have begun to find deep inspiration and profound comfort in that little phrase in the middle.

When I reflect upon Jesus saying, "I do not give to you as the world gives," I can't help but think about how the world does give. And what I've come up with isn't always pretty. In my experience, the world often gives stingily and haphazardly, with conditions, and expectations.

The gifts of the world, things like power and privilege, status, comfort and material items- all look nice, but appearances can be very deceptive. These gifts, so shiny and enticing, are most often fleeting and flimsy, and they rarely come without some sort of strings attached. So when Jesus says that he does not give as the world gives, he is saying something profound. Where the world gives with judgment, Jesus gives with acceptance. Where the world gives sparingly, Jesus gives in abundance. Where the world gives conditionally, Jesus gives with open arms.

We have become so accustomed to taking what the world gives that we have come to believe that it is what we deserve. So we buy into stereotypes and generalizations and try to fit ourselves into molds that someone else cast. We convince ourselves that we should try harder or do better, that we need to be a certain way or say a certain thing to be worthy, to be valued, to be loved.

Because that is what the world tells us. And then Jesus says, “I do not give to you as the world gives.”

Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician, a pioneer in the field of mind/body health. Her work focuses on the needs of people with life-threatening illnesses, and her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, is a compilation of stories and reflections from her vast experience with a wide range of people.

In one story, she tells of a colleague who was the head of family medicine at a prominent medical school. He had a patient, a homeless woman who carried all of her worldly possessions in two shopping carts. She writes:

Once a month she would bring these up the steep hill to his clinic by lashing them alternately to the parking meters with a belt. First she would tie one, then wheel the other to the next meter uphill, tie it, go back for the first one, untie it, and wheel it to the meter above the second until both she and the two carts were at the clinic’s front door. He saw her once a month on a Wednesday. Her speech was sometimes rambling and her clothing was filthy and eccentric. This deeply kind and respectful man was not troubled by this. With his usual grave courtesy he welcomed her into his consulting room, listened to the details of her difficult life, and did what he could to ease her burden.

After he had been seeing her for some time, he became aware that she sometimes came to the hospital on days when he was not there. The clinic nurses were puzzled by this at first, as she seemed to know in some mysterious way that it was not her day to see the doctor. After talking with her, they determined that she simply wanted to go to his consulting room. Once there, she did not go in, but would stand on the threshold and slowly and deliberately place her right foot inside the empty room and then withdraw it again and again. After a while she would be satisfied and go away again.

Remen concludes, “The places in which we are seen and heard are holy places. They remind us of our value as human beings.”<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus addresses his disciples in John’s gospel, you can hear the love pouring from him. He sees them and he knows them- he knows their confusion and he understands the pain that they will soon feel. He leaves space for that- he doesn’t try to talk them out of it, and he doesn’t try to shield them from the very real heartaches of life. What he does is give them peace, and promise always be with them, by the power of the Spirit.

Talk about not giving as the world gives.

Jesus is God’s perfect display of the love God has for all of creation. It is a love that flows freely and is unencumbered by human traits like greed or jealousy or expectations. It is a love that knows our faults and our shortcomings and embraces us still. It is a love that allows us to be who we are and where we are, and in so doing calls us to so much more than we could imagine possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), pp.243-244.

It is a love that doesn't seek to fix everything, but in its purity can heal all things.

God's love is a mystery we will never fully comprehend, and it has a power we can never hope to grasp. Our love, human as it is, will remain flawed and imperfect. Our actions, our thoughts, our love will always bear the imprint of the world - that is just the nature of our humanity.

But in Christ, God's perfect love took on human flesh that we might see and experience its profound beauty. And that ought to change us.

Knowing Jesus means not accepting that what the world gives is all that there is. It means believing that all people have worth, and that every soul is precious. It means seeking in every interaction to love with the love of Christ, which sees beyond the surface to the very heart of a person.

I recently read a beautiful article by the Quaker activist and writer, Parker Palmer. Palmer is a regular columnist for Krista Tippett's blog, *On Being*. Last month he wrote a piece about caregiving entitled, "The Gift of Presence, the Perils of Advice."

In it, he observed that, "The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is."<sup>2</sup>

Loving others with the love of Christ means understanding that we are not called to fix or to save anyone- we are called to love everyone. We don't have to have it all figured out- and we don't have to expect that others will either. Though the world would tell us differently, the only voice we are called to follow is the voice of the one who said,

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, "The Gift of Presence, the Perils of Advice," [www.onbeing.org](http://www.onbeing.org), 4/27/16