

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 14:23-29

My *Shalom* I Give to You*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Some of you may know that I come from an interfaith family. My brother Andy, like me, grew up Roman Catholic. But around eleven years ago, he converted to Judaism. Now why did he do that? Well, his wife Abi was raised in the Jewish Reform movement. And as my brother learned more about the beauty of the Jewish tradition through his marriage with Abi, he decided to formally convert to Judaism.

My brother's faith has been central to his life, just as my faith has been central to mine. Just last month, Andy was installed as the president of his synagogue in Silicon Valley out in the San Francisco Bay Area. This position is akin to being the senior warden in an Episcopal parish. It was a honor for me to be at his installation.

As you might imagine, the recent synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and San Diego have impacted me greatly. Every Shabbat, there is a part of me that worries about Andy, Abi, and their two sons when they are at their house of worship. I was reminded of this reality last month, when I saw a police car prominently parked at the entrance of their synagogue's parking lot to deter potential acts of violence.

Of course, the recent uptick in violence against houses of worship has not been limited to synagogues. There have also been attacks on mosques and churches – not to mention widespread violence around the world from Syria to Afghanistan to the South Sudan.

In light of all this violence around us, how do we make sense of Jesus' promise of peace in today's gospel reading?

In today's reading from the fourteenth chapter of John, Jesus gives his farewell discourse to his disciples at the Last Supper. He promises them the gift of peace when he is gone. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," he says.

But how do we reconcile what Jesus is saying with all the violence in the world? What is the meaning of Jesus' gift of "peace" in a world that is so full of chaos and violence?

Well, one place to start might be our Sunday eucharistic liturgy. Peace is a central theme in the mass. First and foremost, there is the passing of peace at the middle of mass, right after the Confession. "The *peace* of the Lord be always with you," the priest says. And then we dutifully greet one another with the word "peace."

But we also say the word "peace" in a number of other places during the mass. The Gloria begins with "Glory be to God on high, and on earth *peace*, good will towards men." During the Prayers of the

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People, we ask God to “Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and *peace*.”

The Agnus Dei, which is sung as we approach the altar at the beginning of communion, closes with “O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, grant us thy *peace*.” And the priest begins the usual final blessing by saying “The *peace* of God, which passeth all understanding.”

One thing is clear – peace is a key theme in our mass. There’s peace everywhere! But it’s also true that we say the word “peace” so often on Sundays that sometimes it’s hard to figure out exactly what that word means. We’re so used to saying the word that we stop thinking about it.

And so, another place for understanding the meaning of “peace” is the Bible. The Greek word for peace is *eirēnē*. It appears over a hundred times in the New Testament, and it appears in every New Testament book except for First John. If you know someone named Irene, you now know that her name means “peace.”

But *eirēnē*, or peace, has a special meaning in the biblical context. In the secular context, *eirēnē* meant the absence of war or violence. That’s how most of us understand the word “peace” today. Take the Nobel peace prize, for example. It’s given to a person (or persons) who has ended a significant conflict somewhere in the world.

Or take the Memorial Day holiday. On this weekend, we honor those individuals who have given us peace through their wartime sacrifices.

But in the biblical context, the word for peace is not just about the absence of war or violence. In fact, the biblical notion of peace was actually a critique of the “Pax Romana” of the Roman Empire, which was a false sense of peace brought about by violence and fear.

Nor is the biblical notion of peace just about internal calm or the absence of a troubled mental or emotional state.

Instead, the biblical notion of peace is about the affirmative presence of something quite beautiful: *shalom*. Most of you know of *shalom* as a Jewish greeting that means peace. But *shalom* is much more than the mere absence of violence or conflict. Rather, *shalom* refers to a positive sense of wholeness, completeness, and well-being that comes only from being in right relationship with God and with others.

Have you ever been in a situation in which you’ve had an unresolved conflict with someone? It might be someone in your family. Or someone at work. Or, God forbid, someone here at church. I don’t know about you, but the presence of unresolved conflict is often a source of ongoing tension that can eat away at our sense of well-being. It’s like the proverbial pebble in your shoe.

Growing up, I had a difficult relationship with my father. He had a hard childhood, being cut off from his family at a young age due to the communist revolution in China. My dad faced the stresses of being the sole breadwinner in a first-generation immigrant family, and often those stresses would emerge as frustration and anger towards me. For me, Father’s Day was never an easy holiday. I never could relate to dads on TV like Mike Brady or George Jetson.

But one of the great blessings in my life was the fact that my father and I were able to reconcile with each other shortly before he died of cancer some twelve years ago. We were able to talk honestly about the hurts and emotional wounds that we had inflicted on each other and to ask for mutual

forgiveness. It was not an easy thing, but it did pave the way to an existential sense of peace that remains with me to this day.

That's what *shalom* means. Only when we are able to reconcile with another person – to say “I’m sorry” or to make amends for what we have done – can we be in right relationship. And there is something wonderfully life-giving about that.

What Jesus has done for us through the sacrifice of the cross is to bring us peace in the Jewish sense of *shalom*. Through the crucifixion and the atonement, Jesus has brought us into right relationship with God. As the new Adam, Jesus has reversed the fall and original sin. And that gives us a deep existential peace that, in the words of the final blessing at mass, “passeth all understanding.” And that is the peace that the world cannot give that Jesus references in today’s gospel.

And so, the peace that Jesus promises to us is not about the absence of violence or conflict. Indeed, the history of Christianity is filled with violence – from the crucifixion itself to the persecutions and martyrdoms that have existed over the last twenty-one centuries.

Rather, the peace that Jesus promises to us is an existential peace that comes from being in right relationship with God. When we are in right relationship with God, we worry less about our own sins and shortcomings, and we focus more on bringing a sense of peace and well-being to all those around us. We receive the gift of Christ’s peace not as a *substitute for* violence, but rather *in spite of* the violence in the world.

At the end of today’s mass, we will all process outside to the garden. Our beautiful garden is a ministry unto itself and a source of peace, or *shalom*, for the hundreds of people who pass through it each week. We do this to honor Rogation Sunday, a time in which we recognize the beauty of God’s original creation and the Garden of Eden.

Even in the midst of all the anxieties of life in New York City and in this chaotic, violent, and fallen world, our garden is a visible reminder of the peace of right relationship through Christ Jesus.

Jesus says to us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Or, in Jewish terms, “*Shalom* I leave with you; my *shalom* I give to you.”

May the *shalom* of the Lord be always with you. And may the *shalom* of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.