

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 22, 2022

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## Abiding Peace

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thomas Merton does a great job of explaining the major reason humanity struggles to attain peace. Please pardon the non-inclusive language of this quote; Merton writes, “Man is not at peace with his fellow man because he is not at peace with himself. He is not at peace with himself, because he is not at peace with God.”<sup>1</sup> Merton is echoing a theme common to Christian teachings since the time of Christ. C.S. Lewis puts it this way, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Lewis and Merton must have studied John 14 extensively to come to this teaching. We hear numerous times in this chapter language about Christ being in/with God and thereby God being in/with us (e.g., John 14:9, 14:11, 14:17, 14:21, 14:28). In theological terms, this is the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Luther termed this the “Happy Exchange.” In Christ our sin is taken by Christ and we are imputed with Christ's own righteousness.

The larger point of this chapter is that God is the source of love and peace. You may recall my argument in my Maundy Thursday sermon that we are prone to misinterpreting a key verse in this chapter, verse 15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” In that sermon I suggested that while it is common to interpret that verse as conditional (an “if...then” statement), it does not **have** to be understood that way. We can just as easily interpret that statement as causal instead. Which is to say that loving Jesus causes one to keep his commands and keeping his commands is simply not possible without loving Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Merton, Thomas. *Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions Pub. Corp., 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. London: William Collins, 2017.

Or, to reiterate Merton's and Lewis' point, without God humanity is simply not capable of knowing either love or peace. Without the source of love we cannot truly know love. Without the source of peace we cannot truly know peace. This is complicated though, by the fact that in order to know God we need to also know ourselves. Christ tells us here in this chapter that he will dwell with us...in us. So any exploration of Christ has to involve an exploration of ourselves.

This likely sounds familiar, and it should! This is mirror-work once again. I cannot stress enough that for Christians, in order to truly grow in faith and to mature spiritually we have to do the work of knowing who we are and who God made us to be. How on earth can we expect to know love if we do not know God's love for us? How can we know love at all without knowing who we are to be loved? How can we know peace if we do not know the source of peace? And how can we expect to pursue peace if we do not have peace within ourselves? It is impossible.

One of my favorite modern theologians is a Finnish professor of Lutheran theology by the name of Tuomo Mannermaa. It's not an easy read, but I highly recommend his book, "Christ Present in Faith." In that work he argues that Justification and Sanctification, that is being saved by God (or justified) and being made holy (or being sanctified), are two sides of the same coin. I quote from the aforementioned book:

When a human being believes in Christ, Christ is present, in the very fullness of his divine and human nature, in that faith itself. Luther understands the presence of Christ in such a concrete way that, according to his view, Christ and the Christian become "one person." In this "happy exchange," the human being becomes a partaker of God's attributes. The attributes that Luther mentions most often are "life," "righteousness," "wisdom," "salvation" ("blessedness"), "power," "joy," "courage," "new understanding," and "love."<sup>3</sup>

Now, I will diverge a bit with Luther and Mannermaa on this because I think we can go even deeper than Christ simply being present in faith. As I understand the concept of *imago dei*, that is the doctrine that humanity is made in the very image of God, I believe there is an argument to be made that God's attributes are present in every expression of life, and in humanity

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<sup>3</sup> Mannermaa, Tuomo, and Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna. *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

in particular, as bearing God's image. All life then bears within it the source of life...a spark of the divine if you will.

This logic suggests that any experience of love or peace (and I would add mercy, compassion, grace, eternity, justice, holiness, and more) is an experience of the divine. Almost as though we know these things only because of that presence of the divine within ourselves, proven by *imago dei*. This also leads us to Luther's understanding of salvation articulated in his explanation to the Third Article of the creed: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel..."<sup>4</sup>

This has got to be one of the more academic and (perhaps) dry sermons I've given in a while. So let me bring it to practicality and applicability. All of this theology-speak is merely a way of saying that if we want to pursue peace, love, justice, and all of those other wonderful attributes of God; we must, at some point, experience them within ourselves and explore that experience of them and what it might mean for who we are and who we have been created to be.

To know God we must explore scripture, have examples of faith and righteousness to look to, and experience God at work in our lives. And along with all of that, we also have to look in the mirror! We have to explore the things inside of us that get in the way of experiencing the divine. The things that rear up and demand that we act selfishly and center our lives on our own wants and desires. The things that lead to selfishness, chaos, and harm. And then we can see deeper.

We can see that part of ourselves that can know quiet...serenity... calmness...peace. The deeper inner core that can hold the tension of being both saint and sinner. Acknowledging how we are broken in order that we can move beyond it to forgiveness...to peace. A different sort of peace, the peace of the divine abiding with us and in us. The loving, gracious, and accepting gaze of God which holds us ever in view.

Deep experiences of love and peace are deep experiences of God. Going deep into the muck and mire of our selfish selves...our sinners, is the only way to offer that brokenness to God for redeeming. And in God's gaze it is

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, M., & Wengert, T. J. (2016). *Luther's Small Catechism: 500 Years of reformation*. Augsburg Fortress.

redeemed! Wonder of wonders! We can face the darkest depths of our souls and find, even there, God's love and grace. Because God! Abides! With! Us! Because God! Abides! In! Us!

Amen.