

Passing the Peace

John 20:19-31

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There was a pastor who went to his son's kindergarten class to talk to the children about Easter. He started by asking if the children knew what Easter was. A whole sea of hands went up.

One child spoke up and said that Easter was that time when people gave each other heart-shaped cards and when parents got all kissy-kissy. "No," replied the pastor, "I'm afraid that's Valentine's day".

Another child said that Easter was when a giant bunny came around and laid chocolate eggs at people's houses. "Well, there is a lot of talk about the Easter bunny, but that's not what Easter is really about," said the pastor.

Finally, the pastor motioned to his own son, who was one of the children raising his hand. "Easter is when Jesus died on the cross and then after three days he came out of the tomb," said the little boy. At that point the pastor began to feel a little fatherly pride that his son had so eloquently answered the question, until the little boy continued, "... and if he sees his shadow, he goes back in and we have six more weeks of winter."

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So close...

One week out from the most glorious day of the year in the church, what do we do with the Easter message? What's next? As great as Easter is, don't you get the idea that there is some unfinished business for us to attend to? I ask the question because our text from the Gospel according to John reminds us that after we've taken away the Easter lilies, after we've put away the pretty new clothes we bought for last Sunday, after we've consumed our last chocolate egg, after we've resumed all those things we gave up for Lent – after all these things, the truth is we're not through with Easter. In fact, we're never through with Easter, are we?

That's what John reminds us. He makes us recognize that even though Easter may have passed on the calendar, we can never really put it behind us. We can't put Easter behind us because Jesus has given us a task. "As the Father has sent me," said Jesus, "I am sending you."

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Jesus has given us a job. Our job is to go out and tell the world the central message that we celebrate at Easter – about God's love and about Jesus and about abundant, everlasting, eternal life. We are to be proclaimers of the Good News. It's about the Christian's call to... (brace yourself for the word!) **EVANGELISM!!!**

I know, many of us shake in our boots when we hear that word. Many are uncomfortable with the

notion that we are called to the work of evangelism. But that doesn't take away from the fact that all are called to the task of evangelism.

The New Testament notion of evangelism comes from the Greek word, euangelizo. Literally, it means "to proclaim good news". As Christians, we are called to the task of taking the good news of Jesus Christ to the poor, to the outcast, to the oppressed, to all the people of the world. That's what evangelism is – it's sharing with others the love and compassion of Christ.

Jesus said to the disciples, As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. But before he said that, he said something else to them, two times, something that helps us understand what evangelism is at its most basic: Peace be with you, said Jesus. Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

Evangelism is about peace—peace with God and peace with one another. The kind of peace which Jesus offers to us, and which he calls us to pass on to the world is more than a cessation of hostilities. It's more than the making of a truce. The peace which you and I are now called to pass on to the world is Shalom, a sense of wholeness, completeness, well-being; shalom entails being whole, complete in our relationship with God and with one another.

Jesus is calling us to pass the peace, to proclaim the good news that all can now be right and complete between us and God, and between us and one another. And passing the peace entails two things: it entails telling others about the good news of Jesus Christ, and it entails showing the good news by the way we live our lives.

Even though most of us don't like to talk about our faith, nevertheless, it is something we must do if we are to pass the peace of Christ to the world. It's interesting, isn't it—how we're willing to talk freely about other matters that are important, but not about the most important message we can proclaim. Why do you think that's so? Why are we so reluctant to talk about Jesus?

The fact is, you don't need eloquent words to share the gospel message. You don't need flashy printed material to hand out. You don't need to be well-versed in every doctrine of the Christian faith. All you need to do is share the simple message of God's love in such a way that people will listen.

Tony Campolo tells the story about young Tommy Jones. Tommy was born with a condition that left him with a twisted, spasmodic body, and slow, slurred, difficult speech. When he was 12 years old Tommy's parents sent him to summer camp for a couple of weeks. And as is the case with many twelve year old boys, a number of the boys in Tommy's cabin were ruthless in poking fun at Tommy. Behind his back they would imitate his jerky movements. They would snicker among themselves when they watched Tommy try to eat his meals. They short-sheeted his bed and did the warm-water-on-the-wrist prank. Through all of this Tommy played right along, smiling and laughing as though he thought it was all a blast.

On the last night of camp there was a big banquet. Each cabin was to elect a spokesperson to share with the rest of the camp some of their thoughts about their experiences. The twelve-year-olds cruelly elected Tommy to be their spokesman. They could hardly keep from bursting out in laughter as they anticipated Tommy's speech.

Tommy slowly walked up to the podium. He struggled as he spoke, agonizing over every word. After

what seemed like an eternity, he managed to get out three simple sentences: “Jesus loves you. And Jesus loves me. And I love you.”

And then he sat down.

And everybody was silent.

You really don't need eloquent words to share the gospel, just words about God's love, spoken from the heart.

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... passing the peace also means living the gospel message, both within the Christian community and in the world at large. And we do that by obeying Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us. Jesus said, “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”¹ It is when we live lives marked by Christ-like love—love that is sacrificial, self-giving, servant love—it is when we live the law of love that we demonstrate the kind of peace that is possible for those who believe in Jesus.

The truth is, the love that we demonstrate for one another is a powerful witness. It heals wounds, it makes forgiveness possible, it lifts up the downcast, it encourages the faithful, it comforts those who are afraid, and it invites the outsider.

This past week I was in Cleveland, Ohio, visiting my aunt Arlis, who is nearing the end of her thirty-year battle with cancer. I have told people that aside from my mom and dad, and my brothers and our families, Arlis really doesn't have any family. And none of us live anywhere near Cleveland, so she's been facing this battle by herself.

But that's not true. You see, when I got to the nursing home on Wednesday, there were three angels with Arlis. They were directing the movers who were transferring her belongings from her independent living apartment to her assisted living quarters. They had spent the previous day packing things in boxes. They are her friends who have worn out their tires taking her back and forth to the Cleveland Clinic for treatments. They are her friends who have made it their business to make sure she is receiving the care she needs. They are her friends who have given of themselves without reservation for my aunt Arlis. They have surrounded her with love. They are her angels.

How do you demonstrate your faith by the way you live? When people know that you are a Christian, do they see Christ in your life?

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... to love one another.

John ends the 20th chapter of his gospel with these words: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”²

That you may have life in his name... That's what's at stake here, isn't it—that others may have life in his name. To present Jesus Christ to the world so that the world may believe, and have life. It is so the peace that is ours in Christ will also be passed to the next generation.

There is a poignant scene in the old, old movie, *Goodbye Mr. Chips*. At the end of the movie, Mr.

1 John 13:35

2 John 20:30-31

Chipping is lying in bed, near death. The doctor and the headmaster of the school are at the bedside, talking about Mr. Chips, who had taught at the school for more than 60 years. Mr. Chips was a legend at the school, and he touched the lives of countless students who had passed through. The headmaster remembers that Mr. Chips had been married briefly, but that his wife had died many, many years earlier. "Pity, they never had children," he said.

At that point, Mr. Chips' eyes opened and he spoke. "I beg your pardon, but did I hear you say I never had children? That's not true. I had children. I had thousands of children... I had thousands of children..."

Often in the church we say that the purpose of Christian education, especially in the early ages, is to be able to answer in the affirmative the question, Will your children have faith?

In terms of evangelism—in terms of passing the peace of Christ—perhaps it is more appropriate to rephrase it as a slightly different question: "Will your faith have children?"

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, said Jesus, I am sending you.

Will your faith have children?

Let the peace of Christ be with you...