

Passing the Peace

Early in our Sunday worship services here at the Chapel, all of a sudden we stand up and start shaking hands. People hug and during the fright of the COVID pandemic we bumped fists or elbows. We get out of our pews and cut across the sanctuary to greet one another. There's a chaotic and rowdy mixing of folks in the center aisle. We address one another with the words used by Jesus, the Apostles, and the early church community, "The Peace of Christ be with you." And, we are blessed by the response, "And, also with you."



With all its movement, noise, and pandemonium... which by the way is not limited to the sanctuary but is simultaneously taking place in the "Chat Box" online...this tradition is not a distraction from worship or an interruption in the spirituality of the hour, but a beautiful and time-honored element of our worship practice as the community of Christ in this place.

We call it "The Passing of the Peace".

We Pass the Peace for several reasons, all rooted in or affirmed by the Bible.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there, you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Originally, the Passing the Peace began as a way for people in the early church to be reconciled to one another before making their offerings at the altar. It is for this reason that the Passing of the Peace always comes in the service before the offering is taken and before Communion is celebrated.

We also Pass the Peace because at the Last Supper, Jesus said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27), and later he said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12). When Jesus himself appeared to the disciples after his resurrection he greeted them by saying, "peace be with you" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26). In bringing these verses together we learn that just as Jesus shared his peace with us, so we should share Christ's peace with one another.

Sharing the peace of Christ is an ancient Christian tradition, not only in the words of Jesus, but also in the practices of the Christian community. The Apostle Paul begins every one of his letters by saying, "Grace to you, and peace" (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, etc.). This suggests that in the very early Church "Grace to you and peace" was the way Christians greeted one another. It was their secret handshake.

This comparison to a secret handshake brings to mind an article shared with me by John Caggiano written by Reverend Doctor Paul Ryan, the Coordinator for Christian Formation at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Reverend Ryan reminds us that post-game handshakes are a time-honored tradition in sports and that these practices are very simple but have a profound meaning and significance. He writes, "Although we usually devote little thought to these actions, we are shocked when they are abandoned or perverted as in the case of a school district that banned the practice because it had degenerated into spitting, cursing, and fist-fights." (Reference the Kentucky High School Athletic Association)

Ryan continues, "During the game they 'fight,' engage in 'battle,' 'conquer' or suffer 'defeat'." But at the end of the day athletes are not at war. By a simple hand gesture, athletes declare that they are at peace."

Likewise, in the Passing of the Peace, "When we extend our hand to another, we identify with Jesus, who extended his life to the point of death to make peace with humanity. (Col 1:20-21). What's more, in the midst of divisions we symbolize our unity through handshakes and hugs. (Eph. 2:14-21). Likewise, when we regularly pass the peace we practice God's call to make every effort to maintain the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:3)"

Reverend Ryan asks us to consider the cumulative impact of the consistent practice of passing the peace over time. He likens it to how we train young children to say "please" and "thank you". "Though at the beginning the toddler mechanically repeats the words, eventually her heart fills the words with grace and gratitude; indeed her heart is shaped in the form of "please" and "thank you." In the same way, passing the peace gives us the vocabulary for expressing peace as we mature in faith and, in fact, shapes our hearts in the form of peace."

As we practice passing the peace each Sunday, it becomes harder and harder to imagine that a simple handshake, fist bump, or hug could ever degrade into a fist fight. Reverend Ryan asks, "How could the same hand that embraces the frail hand of the elderly, the shaking hand of the sick, the tentative hand of the introvert, the rough hand of the laborer, or the soft hand of a little child be considered a weapon? How could the hand that is regularly trained in worship to extend peace become a cause for division? This is the possibility that a simple gesture on Sunday gives us."

The grace and peace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, be with you all!

Peace,
Pastor Paul