

**There's an App for That:  
Reflections on the Most Important Christian Qualities**

*Peace*

Ezekiel 37:24-28; John 14:25-27

June 27, 2010

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor

We call them the desert fathers and mothers now, the Abbas and Ammas. They were men and women of the fourth and fifth centuries who left society, took up residence in the desert, and lived as hermits or in small communities. They believed that the call of Jesus could not be lived in an ordinary life, with an ordinary family, doing an ordinary job. “If you would be perfect,” Jesus said, “go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, ... and come, follow me.” So the Abbas and Ammas did just that. They abandoned ordinary life to focus their whole being upon devotion to God. They ate little and prayed much. They possessed nothing yet had everything. Many became wise, and people sought them for counsel.

Abba Agathon was one of these desert fathers. According to a rather whimsical story, he went to town one day. Along the way, he came upon a man who was crippled. The man asked Agathon where he was going. He told him he was going to town to sell some items. “Do me the favor,” the man requested, “of carrying me there.”

So the gentle Abba carried the cripple man to town. When the Agathon sold the first item, the cripple man demanded to know how much money he got for it. Then he demanded that Agathon buy him a cake, which he did. This questioning and demanding took place all day, until Agathon sold all his items.

As Agathon prepared to leave, the cripple man made another request. “Do me the favor of carrying me back to the place where you found me,” he said. So once more Agathon picked up the man and carried him back to the place where he found him. The cripple man then surprisingly said, “Agathon, you are filled with divine blessing, in heaven and on earth.”

Here's how the story ends. “Raising his eyes, Agathon saw [no one]; it was an angel of the Lord, come to try him.” (Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, p. 31)

The Abbas and Ammas were not Jesus, but many of these desert dwellers shared this trait with Jesus: they were at peace. It is the third fruit of the Spirit, Paul says. Love is first, then joy, and then peace. It is one of those nine important qualities that the Apostle Paul says Christians should cultivate. And that's what we're doing here this summer, cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives and in our church.

So today I ask, why is peace so important? And more importantly what is it? Guess what? Again, there's an app for that. It is John 14, that wonderfully rich text from the end of Jesus' life. Again this teaching comes from the Thursday night in the last week of Jesus' life. The next day he would be crucified. On this evening, he told his disciples that he was "going away," meaning that he was going to die. Obviously this was very troubling news for the disciples. They left everything to follow him. They certainly didn't expect it to end this way. So Jesus tried to reassure them by saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." He told them that they would not be left orphaned, or alone. The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, would be their new companion. Then he said this to his highly anxious friends: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...." Then he reassured them again, "Do not let your hearts be troubled...."

The Greek word that is translated as "peace" here is not primarily about peace within relationships, either individually or with groups or nations. That is how we tend to use the word peace. When two disagreeable parties find common ground, we might say that there is opportunity for peace. That's not how Jesus was using this word in this text. It comes from the Hebrew word "shalom," which was more than peace between disagreeing parties. Shalom was what we might call well-being. Not financial well-being. Not physical well-being or anything related to outward circumstances. Shalom was the well-being of one's innermost self. It was a Hebrew greeting. To wish someone shalom was to wish that person a deep inner peace, well-being. When a pregnant Jewish woman reached the sixth month of her pregnancy, she began to pray for her child's shalom. It was also written on Jewish grave markers—a final well-being or salvation. The Hebrews flanked life, beginning and end, with this prayer for shalom, peace, well-being. And on Thursday night in the last week of his life, that is what Jesus bequeathed to his disciples, peace, his peace.

So when I read this text I want to know where Jesus' peace came from. How did he become such a man of peace? And if he is bequeathing that to us, how can we become people of peace? Here's what I think. This well-being that we see in Jesus came not just from an *understanding* but from an *acceptance* that God is love. For Jesus, God was no ogre who was out to get him. There is no scene in the New Testament where Jesus cowers in fear before God. His dying words were a prayer, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." No, God was a loving heavenly Father to Jesus, One to be trusted, One to whom he could completely surrender himself. Everything in the gospels suggests that Jesus fully accepted that God is love, and that was the source of his well-being.

But for many of us that verdict is still out, isn't it? We may say it intellectually, "Why, of course, God is love! Sure everybody knows that!" But some of us (I put myself in this category) have so many pictures of an angry, wrathful God etched on our hearts that we have not fully accepted what we profess to believe. It's not that we don't understand it intellectually. We do. It's not that we don't want to accept it. Again, we do. It's this shadow of doubt that hasn't fully gone away, and from time to time it causes us to fear that God might be that divine ogre, that God might really be out to get us. It is hard to be at peace when that is your image of God.

Another one of the Abbots used to say that our relationship with God goes through three stages. In the beginning, he said, we serve God out of fear, like a slave. The consequences of ignoring God are too great (i.e., Hell), so driven by fear we come to God. This is an immature way of relating to God. In the next stage, he said that we serve God out of a desire for reward, like a hired hand. The reward of heaven or blessing is too great to ignore, so driven by a desire for reward we come to God. This is a selfish way of relating to God. He said that the third and final stage is the most mature. We serve God out of friendship, out of the pure love of God, like a child in God's family. (Ibid., p. 27)

This is the best news we will ever hear. I hope it will penetrate into the marrow of your bones. God is love. Yes, even to sinners. And yes, that includes you and me. It's not just a matter of understanding it intellectually. It is a matter of accepting it. That is the beginning of peace.

Here's what it does for us. When we can accept that God really does love us, then we can love our selves. Said another way, then we can be at peace with who we are.

Some people go through life hating who they are. They're either too fat or too skinny. Their nose is either too big or too small. They did something in their past for which they cannot forgive them self. They fall into a trap of self-loathing, where they see themselves as unworthy of love, unworthy of friendship, and unworthy of God. It can be a dark spiral that leads to depression, which may be the opposite of shalom.

I had a friend in Birmingham who loathed herself. You could tell by looking at her. Even in the briefest conversation you could tell that something was wrong. She bounced from therapist to therapist, from religion to religion, and from newest fad to newest fad. I asked her one day what she was hoping to accomplish. She said that she wanted to make herself acceptable. "Nothing works," she sighed.

It broke my heart to see good, loving, caring people caught in this cycle of self-loathing. She was wrong, of course. Something does work. She was actually hiding behind a façade of false selves. Through the many years and many painful experiences, she had lost her true self, the person God created, the one whom God loved infinitely. I've not had contact with her in ten plus years, but I hope she has found that person, the one that God created and loves. When she does, she can love herself. She can be at peace with who she is.

Love first. Then joy. And then peace is the third fruit of the Spirit. It is well-being, shalom, deep within. It is a gift Jesus bequeathed to his disciples. He waited until the night before his crucifixion. With the light of history shining upon him, he comforted his anxious disciples, saying to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...." This summer let's cultivate peace within this family of faith.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to know your peace that passes all understanding. And then help us too to bequeath that peace to others. Amen.