

The Power of Shalom

Psalm 67; John 14:25-27

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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 crippled 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 town, the crippled man made one more 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 crippled 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, of course, but many of these desert dwellers bore Christ-like features. They were not clamoring for attention, grasping for possessions, or climbing any social ladder. There were comfortable in their skin and with their faith. They possessed what Jesus promised in our text for today: shalom.

Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace, a word Jesus would have known. He used it in John 14, that wonderfully rich text from the end of Jesus' life. This teaching comes from the Thursday night in the last week of Jesus' life, what we now call Maundy Thursday. The next day he would be crucified. On this evening, he told his disciples that he was "going away" and that where he was going they could not follow. He was going to the cross, something he alone had to do. 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 Advocate, 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...."

Shalom is not primarily about peace within relationships, either individually or with groups or nations. That is how we tend to use the word peace. That is why I prefer the word shalom. When two disagreeable parties find common ground, we might say that they found peace. That's not how Jesus was using this word in this text. Shalom was what we might call wellbeing. Not financial wellbeing. Not physical wellbeing or anything related to outward circumstances. *Shalom was the wellbeing of one's innermost self.* Let me say that again: shalom was the wellbeing of one's innermost being. It was used as a Hebrew greeting. "Shalom," you might greet a friend. It meant to wish that friend a deep inner peace, wellbeing. When a 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 wellbeing or salvation. The Hebrews flanked life, beginning and end, with this prayer for shalom, peace, wellbeing.

On Thursday night in the last week of his life, that is what Jesus wished for his disciples, shalom, his peace.

So when I read this text I want to know how to acquire or develop shalom. How did Jesus become such a man of shalom? How could he bequeath that to his disciples? And, most importantly, how can we become people of shalom?

Here's what I think. This well being that we see in Jesus came not just from an *understanding* but from an *acceptance*. The theologian Paul Tillich used to say that salvation is our acceptance that we have been accepted. Our acceptance that we have been accepted. By God. By the Ultimate. As Tillich would have said, by the Ground of Our Being. There is no scene in the New Testament where Jesus cowers in fear before God. Remember his dying words were a prayer, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." 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 accepted that he was accepted, and that was the source of his shalom.

Here's the problem some of us deal with. We're not quite sure, are we? We may say it intellectually, "Why, of course, God is love, and God accepts me! Sure everybody knows that!" But some of us 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 we're not accepted. We're not acceptable. To God. The Ultimate.

We cannot be at peace when that is our image of God.

Another one of the Abbas 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)

That is accepting that you have been accepted. That penetrates the marrow of our bones. It's not just a matter of understanding it intellectually. It is a matter of accepting it. That is the beginning 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 something was wrong. She bounced from therapist to therapist, from religious experience to religious experience, and from newest fad to newest fad. One day she was explaining an experience she had had with a charismatic group. Something about being an onion and peeling back the layers. This was her newest fad. I asked her what she was looking for. I still remember what she said: "I want to be worthy."

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 themselves. They fall into a trap of self-loathing, where they see themselves as unworthy of love, unworthy of friendship, and unworthy of God.

Salvation is our acceptance that God has accepted us. There is great power in that. There is great power in shalom. When we accept that God has accepted us.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

What a gift. On the night before his crucifixion. A powerful gift that is extended to us too. Shalom. Be at peace.

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.