

**Sermon: May 15, 2022 “A Separate Peace”**  
**Scripture: Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29**

In high school, I had a teacher who was passionate about English literature. Through her, I became acquainted with a number of writers, which encouraged me to explore further. By the time I was in my late teens, I fell in love with the writing of Virginia Woolf. I'm not sure what drew me to her work, but there was something about the way she told her stories from the point-of-view of a woman and always in this sort of stream of consciousness fashion that feels very similar to the way I think. Her sentences are long. Her words are often complex and there's an excitement for me in reading new words and jumping to my dictionary to discern their meaning. I'm certain that when I began reading her work I couldn't really have understood the problems of the women she wrote about. Mrs. Dalloway's life wasn't Jessica Coon's life. I was in my late teens and all the characters were living in different times with lives that were so far removed from my own, but still, I was drawn to it. It didn't occur to me that I shouldn't be drawn to it her stories at 19 years of age until I was talking about it with a coworker, Laura, at the video store I worked at who asked why on earth I was reading Virginia Woolf for fun. "That's too much work," she said, "We're out of school now, we should read for fun." I think that was when I began to recognize that not everyone enjoyed doing that kind of "work" in their free time, and reading some literature felt just that way to Laura. Sometimes people just need to be entertained.

While working at the video store, I came across a film called, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" I hadn't seen it. I was more an Audrey and Katharine Hepburn person (still am) and Liz Taylor didn't really leap out at me as

someone I wanted to watch on screen. But I remember hearing the title of that film and thinking, “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf? Apparently, Laura is. Laura is afraid of Virginia Woolf!”

Of course, Laura wasn’t *really* afraid of Virginia Woolf, but she did give me a really hard time about what I read. Always scrutinizing. But ultimately, Woolf’s stunning prose brought me calm and peace, so I kept reading.

As I think about the hours I’ve spent drawn into Woolf’s imaginative stories and the comfort they brought and still bring me, I am struck by the notion that comfort or “peace” can be hard to find. In our gospel selection today, Jesus is attempting to both prepare and comfort his disciples. He further reveals to them that, following the path of many angels and humans before him, he will ascend into heaven, which means, his physical presence will be with the disciples only a little while longer. This news is not welcome news to those who have followed and loved him. After his death and resurrection, I keep thinking about the trauma faced by the disciples and how painful this news must feel to them. When you know someone is leaving, it feels hard, especially if there is uncertainty around when they will return. So, the comfort offered by Christ is necessary and welcome even if the news of his departure isn’t. In typical Jesus fashion, though, what he says is not just comforting, but also challenging. He cautions them about following his teachings, about what that takes, and about how difficult it may be for them to hold onto their belief once he is gone.

Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” I was tempted to linger here. We live in a scary time, which is never more evident to us than it is in the wake of a mass shooting as a confused

and heartbroken community and nation try to make sense of a horrific tragedy, and hearing these words, this message, which appears over 300 times in the Bible in different iterations, is helpful to hear at such a time as this. “Fear not. Do not be afraid.” As I read this passage, I began to think about all the times I have been troubled or afraid. In the year 2022, it seems that being troubled has become something of a pastime. Troubling things surround us in our everyday lives, and as evidenced yesterday afternoon, they appear to us constantly in our 24/7 news cycle. They range from the most mundane troubles to those that impact all of us on a national and international scale.

Jesus doesn’t just tell them not to be troubled as though it’s that easy—although sometimes, I think, we all wish it were. He doesn’t expect that they will never be troubled. If he did, I don’t think he’d have to say that part out loud. He knows that’s a big ask in a broken world, so he doesn’t tell them this in isolation, but prefaces it with this, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” And it is this message that I wish to focus on today. Jesus is leaving them with his gift of peace, and, with that, he means to communicate something profound. Something bigger than the mere words, themselves.

In many Christian churches, although not as much since COVID appeared, we take a few moments to pass the peace to one another in a gesture that probably seems to some like something routine, mechanical, or “old hat” after a while. But this simple gesture carries with it, as I’m sure you are aware, not just biblical foundations, but deep significance. We extend our hands or arms to one another, partly, as a way to identify with Jesus, who extended himself in peace to humankind even to the point of death. Jesus

brought with him peace, and, even though we repaid him violence and bloodshed, still, he leaves his peace with us. Jesus, a man of peace, hoped that one day we, too, would choose to pass that peace to one another. That humanity would practice peace. This is a kind of peace we cannot imagine in a world as broken as ours, I think. And it's why this story and the way of Jesus are so important. Whether you believe Jesus is your savior or not, a man of peace like this leaves an indelible mark on history and it's part of the reason why his story has remained such a powerful one 2,000 years later.

When we think of peaceful people in the world, we might envision a Christian mystic or a Buddhist or someone who practices meditation for long periods of time. We might imagine a person of peace sitting with legs folded and crossed, saying, "Om" over and over again. This is the peace of the *individual* and their relationship with the Divine Truth.

But the peace Jesus gives is not a solitary or passive peace. The peace Jesus gives is both communal and active. When we pass the peace of Jesus to one another, we are making an intentional gesture, one meant to shape our hearts in the form of the words. It's not unlike teaching a child to say "please" and "thank you," it is mechanical at first, but eventually the child understands the meaning and can feel the significance behind the words. Passing the peace has always been something helpful for me as an introvert. When I began this practice at my church in Arkansas, I felt the pressure lifted to think of what to say to my neighbor. Passing the peace, simply saying, "The peace of the Lord be with you," Or "Peace," for an introvert like me, simply meant I was free from attempts to try and make small talk! The gift of peace challenges us to intentionally separate

ourselves from what the world gives us and make an intentional act that lends itself to the creation of a Christ-like community with others. This gesture of peace is foundational to what it means to follow the way of Jesus. This communal, active peace is the peace of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Gandhi. It is the peace of the preacher who went to the scene in Buffalo yesterday to pray with gathered members of the community, to search for a way to find God in the midst of unimaginable tragedy.

Virginia Woolf wrote, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life." Her life wasn't necessarily peaceful. She had troubles and mental illness that took her life. But she understood that peace is not ultimately to be found in solitude or indifference. She knew that true peace is found in relationship with others, a peace that goes beyond words and into the realm of action. That is what it is to be a people of peace. Perhaps withdrawing for a while can bring us back to a kind of peace, we cannot stay there, however, and expect that peace to remain. Chr peace is a separate kind of peace. A peace wholly apart from that which the world gives.

The presence of Christ's peace among the disciples is what will allow them to live out lives faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ—but that road has not been and will not go on to be easy in any way. They've chosen the difficult way of Jesus over the easier way of the world. Jesus's imminent departure must find them unsettled and so Jesus leaves them with his peace, a kind of reassurance of his presence among them even though he is absent in body.

And that part is key. Christ's presence among us. That is what Jesus leaves the disciples with: the gift of peace and presence. An assurance that

they can never go where he is not with them because where they are, his Spirit is also. This Spirit will connect and bind them as they continue to teach, feed, and heal all through the ancient Roman Empire—defying the religious and secular authorities of the day in order to build a more just and peaceful world; in order to usher in the kin-dom of God.

We see this journey continue in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles today. Paul receives a vision which basically gives him a map to overcome the roadblocks standing in the way of the disciples as they go about spreading the good news. It is the Spirit of Jesus that guides and accompanies them on this journey where they run into Lydia and her family, who are so convinced of the message of the way of Jesus, that they are baptized on the spot and extend a kind of radical hospitality to the disciples – one which the disciples cannot turn down. Lydia is *insistent* that they be her guests and they listen. Without the peace Christ leaves with them, which propels them to acts of grace, reconciliation, and love, their message is unlikely to reach people who are drawn to them as they seek to spread the good news throughout the Roman Empire. The peace Christ gives is the peace they pass on and it is contagious in the best possible way.

Passing the peace to one another doesn't test us quite the same way as reading a Virginia Woolf novel might, but it tests us in more important ways. It tests us so that we might be formed into a faithful people seeking to live more closely "the Way" of Jesus Christ: the Way of a more just and merciful life. And it pushes us to do more than merely be polite to one another. It's more than niceness, this way. It challenges us to move beyond ourselves and our worldly concerns, forcing us to consider others and confront the

idea of creating Christ-like community with others. More than a mere formality, offering to others the peace of Christ is a spiritual practice, one that is significant and shouldn't be taken lightly. We don't pass the peace to tick a box, it is not meant to be perfunctory; rather, we do this with joy, with peace that is both in our hearts and on our lips as we speak that peace into existence right here in our community.

And so now, let us stand together to turn and offer to one another a sign of Christ's peace. Amen.