

“Explain this to me”  
May 9, 2010

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.”

In the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
... Amen. (please be seated)

The story goes something like this - a group of people were on pilgrimage in the Middle East, touring the ancient sites in a Holy Land that three of the worlds great religions lay claim to, including our own.

The tour guide, in an effort to simplify and “short cut” hundreds of years of history, informed the group that all of the important shrines and churches that they were going to see had basically three early versions built on top of each other; the original Roman, the Byzantine, that the Emperor Constantine erected in the 4<sup>th</sup> an 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and, finally, the Crusader churches, built during the re-establishing of these sites won back from the Muslims during the bloody Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

To anyone who visits these venerated places, in the crossroads of ancient and current religious conflict, what is clear is that, at the heart of much of the strife over the centuries, ***this is*** a bitter fight over real estate and ***just who*** should control these shared sites of the 3 great Abrahamic traditions.

Two ladies in the party, friends traveling together, one Jewish, the other Christian, were looking out the window of the bus. They were directed to yet another significant sight in this condensed history lesson of the region. This time, to one of the Crusader castles that dot the landscape. The Christian lady was in the midst of sharing her own personal and intimate message of love and peace that *her* faith offers her through Jesus Christ when her Jewish friend pointed at the imposing fortress and asked, very calmly – “**explain this to me?**”

The Christian gal was taken aback at the juxtaposition of the moment as she considered the question and its implications. She couldn't respond in any way that she felt was adequate. She simply took her friend's hand, looked her in the eye and said, “I can't.”

If you and I were on a “dark journey” together, being transported through history and location, looking out the window of a time-traveling tour bus, what might we encounter?

The coach could bump along a dusty rural road in Mississippi in the '30s where we might see an example of, what Billie Holiday referred to in her classic song “Strange Fruit,” the body of a black man, lynched in the dead of night, hanging low from the branch of a tree. The result of local “justice” meted out by a hooded mob.

We could travel north to the Wyoming prairie, decades later, where we would see a tortured young gay man,

Matthew Shepard, lashed to a fence, left to die in an act of cruel hate.

Our tour might continue East to a small Massachusetts town, in the *present* day, where we witness the final, desperate act of a heart broken high school girl, Phoebe Prince, the victim of relentless bullying and harassment by classmates, execute herself in the stairway of her home. Might we not turn to one another at such awful scenes and ask, “**explain this to me?**”

Finally, if you and I were to complete our trip at the foot of a hill called Golgotha outside of Jerusalem 2000 years ago and look up that hill to view the body of a Galilean Jew, nailed to a cross, would we not want an explanation? How could such a thing happen? Where is the “Good News” in these images? Where is the “peace he left us, the peace he gave to us?” Would we not be angry, sad, confused and frightened by such injustice and cruelty?

Today’s brief Gospel passage from John is a continuation of Jesus’ “farewell discourses” where he addresses many of these same emotions being experienced by his disciples. They were scared and perplexed by what their master and friend was telling them. They were unsure as to what was happening and where Jesus was talking about going. *He knew* he was fulfilling his prophetic destiny and paying the price for them and for us, for all time. But they had no such vision.

They *said* they wanted to go with him, that there was no way that they could carry on without him. Peter vowed that he would “lay down his life for him.” Jesus responded by telling them exactly what would happen. In fact, these men would, as a group, betray him, deny him, reject him, and run and hide in fear. It’s not a noble or pretty picture to behold - that in the time of trouble and trial your friends and family abandon you.

As we hear these words about the “peace I leave with you,” receiving the gift of “my peace I give to you” we must shake our heads and wonder, Lord, *what peace?* **Explain this to me?**

In the Gradual Hymn we just sang we encounter this “paradox of peace” clearly and vividly. “Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew the peace of God that filled their hearts brimful, and *broke* them too. Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless, in Patmos died. Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head down was crucified.” As Jesus tells us in the Gospel, this is not a peace given to us “as the world gives.” This is a peace of a far greater price.

But this peace that He foretells will only be accomplished by his “going away” *and* his more mystical “coming to us” in the form of an Advocate, a guide, a Holy Spirit, sent *from* God *through* him. In the midst of this confusion and pain, as in so many other times throughout scripture, we are comforted, told not to “let our hearts be troubled or afraid.” How do we do that? **Explain this to me?**

I believe that it is in the asking of this question that we open ourselves to the Spirit that Christ speaks of – the Spirit he leaves us to advocate and inform us throughout our lives through prayer. It is in the *asking* that we allow ourselves to be “receivers of the Word” in new and exciting ways.

In our uncertainty and brokenness, we are assured that we are not expected to be disciples on our own. This journey of life is primarily “on the job training” and just when we may think we know how to do it and what to expect – **BAM** – we are brought up short and shown to be, yet again, the “beginners” we truly are!

*God knows*. the Christian life is too difficult to be accomplished alone or understood all at once. We pray each day for our “daily bread,” for a ration of nourishment that will sustain us in small increments. It is a daily discipline because it best distributed that way. Not in a “BJ’s Wholesale” sort of way where we can just back up the truck. I just don’t have enough *storage space* for that! But one day at a time. It keeps us mindful, humble and connected to the giver of all good things, each and every day.

We also must pray for our “portion of peace” in much the same way. Not the “peace that the world gives” but the peace available through service to, and *love* of **God**.

Some days, many days, this relationship feels too much to bear. It's just too difficult. The demands on us are just too great. As a recent writing in our daily devotional booklet, "Forward Day by Day" noted, "Jesus, *please leave me alone*. You ask *too much* of me. Let go of your impossible expectations, and let me live in peace." We can't live up to this "raised bar" of perfect peace that requires of me to "turn the other cheek" or "love my enemies." We're too *fearful*, too *self-centered* and not capable of *doing enough or measuring up*.

To this, our Lord says, "you think I don't know that - I know you better than you know yourself." "You are perfect for my uses, to be my disciples, just as you are." *Don't fear*, pick up *your cross*, whatever you see that to be, and *follow me*. The Jesus who died goes on teaching and instructing us, in our time, as a *risen Christ*, through the *power* and the *presence* of the Holy Spirit. *Jesus has shown us the way*. He has demonstrated the *power* of forgiveness. He has been the perfect model for us to use so that when we ask, as we will throughout our lives, "OK, Lord, *explain this to me?*" Listen for the response. *Listen for the response*. Not in your head but *in your heart* and brace yourself for an answer that can transform you from the inside out.

Finally, I can't close without a word about mothers and things *maternal* that we *honor* today. I know it's difficult and problematic to characterize the influence and presence of mothers and grand mothers in our lives because we don't all share the same experience.

But it would be hard for me not to be here, in this place with my own mother present, and not hearken back to the Sundays, many years ago, when we would share in this “mystery of God” with one another.

After service, she and I would enjoy some ‘sacred time’ together down the street at Newport Creamery, where CVS is now. She would have her cream cheese and olive sandwich and I would order my favorite mushroom burger and we’d discuss God and faith, as best understood by a 10 year old. I can’t tell you about any specific conversations because I’m not sure we came to any conclusions or certitudes. I only know it was safe and loving. I felt very grown-up speaking about these things. Whether it was the Gospel reading from that day, or the sermon preached by Fr. Burns, I do remember that *most times* the shared discussion began with, “**Mom, explain this to me ...?**”

May we always remain open to the answers, continuing our journey of faith, reciting the familiar creeds and offering each other, once again, the gift of **God’s** peace ...