

A man is dining in a fancy restaurant, and there is a gorgeous redhead sitting at the next table. He has been checking her out since he sat down but lacks the nerve to talk with her. Suddenly she sneezes, and her glass eye comes flying out of its socket toward the man. He reflexively reaches out, grabs it out of the air, and hands it back to her. "Oh my, I am so sorry," the woman said. As she pops her eye back in place, she said, "Let me buy your dinner to make it up to you." They enjoy a wonderful dinner together, and afterwards they go to the theatre and later had drinks. They talk; they laugh; she shares her deepest dreams and he shares his. After she had paid for everything, he looks at her and says, "You know, you are the perfect woman. Are you this nice to every guy you meet?" "No," she replies, "You just happened to catch my eye."

Once again, John's gospel. Once again, a lot of Johannine theology. This 14th chapter is part of the long 'farewell discourse' of Jesus to His disciples the night before His death. It is Jesus' last will and testament, and contains the core of His teaching as found in John's Gospel.

Jesus earlier promised NOT to leave His disciple orphaned (14:18). He would send another Companion, the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever (14:16), and to continue His work among them. But the world does not recognize the Spirit of truth nor does the world receive the Spirit (14:17), just as it did not welcome Jesus or receive Him. Though the world will no longer see Jesus, He promises that His disciples will see Him (14:19) because He will reveal Himself to them (4:21). The disciples will be privileged by being given an inside look into the purposes and work of Jesus.

Jesus says that He and the Father will come and make their dwelling (*monein*), with those who love Him and keep His word (14:23). So here's the quick trace of this notion of dwelling – unique to John's gospel – and the Book of Revelation, similar in some theological aspects and attributed – questionably – to John. First is "The word became flesh and dwelt – literally tented – among us. Then in chapter 14 – Jesus tells the disciples that He goes to prepare a place for them in His Father's house, where there are many dwellings – in Greek: *monai pollai* – Jesus now promises that He and His Father will continue to dwell with His disciples in the present and into the future. This will then lead to near the very end of the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation, where we will say to one another "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind." God will dwell with us and we with God (Rev 21:3).

How does all this happen? Through the Holy Spirit, the Companion, the Comforter, or Paraclete (the Greek *paracletos* means 'called to come alongside') Jesus will continue to accompany and lead His disciples. Jesus says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit to be alongside His disciples, to teach them and to remind them of all that Jesus has said to them. (John 14:26).

THEREFORE, the disciples should not be anxious: "Don't let your hearts be troubled: (Jn 14:1). Later in that same chapter, Jesus reiterates His word of comfort, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Do not be troubled or afraid." (14:27).

Six chapters after this farewell discourse, Jesus barges in on His fearful disciples after His resurrection. There, He will greet them with 'peace,' (Jn 20:19, 21) This peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which – in the room with them after His resurrection – Jesus BREATHES into His disciples as He sends them out in mission.

OK, I know that was a lot of Greek – but these words are repeated because these are the great themes unique to John's gospel alone. And I'd like to focus in on 2 of them for my next two points.

So second point, “Do not be troubled or afraid.” We live in an anxious age. Family therapist and Rabbi Edwin Friedman wrote in his classic work *A FAILURE OF NERVE*, “Anxiety escalates as a society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change.” When a social system is anxious, people will tend to gravitate toward people and messages that reinforce what they want to hear as a way of mitigating their anxiety. In chronically anxious systems, people become reactive rather than thoughtful. They develop a herd mentality that organizes around the idea of a ‘togetherness’ that discourages dissent, values feelings more than ideas and prefers comfortable certainty over novelty and change. Chronically anxious systems tend to blame outside agents (i.e., the ‘government,’ liberals/conservatives, immigrants, etc.) for their problems, and they have a quick fix mentality that cannot tolerate any pain or discomfort. People in such a system will look to those who can soothe their pain or, to borrow Paul’s marvelous phrase, scratch their ‘itching ears’ with messages that soothe their anxiety (2 Tim 4:3). Does this sound familiar?!

Friedman said the key to changing an anxious system has everything to do with leaders who will take well-defined, self-differentiated and principled stands. Transformational leaders have the capacity to stand alone when necessary and a willingness to be exposed and vulnerable. Yet they’re persistent in the face of reactivity. It isn’t easy, but when leaders have the nerve to be clear, consistent and principled, things can begin to change.

Politicians, pundits and publicity hounds feed off the anxiety of our culture. Anxiety was part of Jesus’ culture as well. He stood alone, took well-defined stands and refused to give in to the reactive anxiety of the religious establishment or the fickle crowds. Of course, Jesus did get crucified for it. As one of my seminary professors used to say, “When God calls you, He’s not doing you a favor.”

It’s never been easy for us to stand up for principle in the face of anxiety, but we are called to “speak the truth in love” in a world where all kinds of anxious winds are blowing. Ephesians 4:14-15) (adapted from Bob Kaylor “The Preacher Stands Alone” in *HOMILETICS*, Jan-Feb 2011, p 8)

Third, so how do we deal with this? We receive the gift of peace from the risen Christ – and do our best to pass it along in our fragile, broken, and anxious world. Blessed Paul Gistiani (1476-1528) said “The whole world cannot rob of its peace the soul who really rests in God’s love; no attack....will disturb it, because genuine love of God is for the soul a rampart that no violence can break down. Christ’s peace is a rock.”

Peace cannot be won by those who fiercely guard their difference – but by those who with open minds and hearts seek out connections, (Katherine Paterson, *THE SPYING HEART*) and sometimes it’s just a simple gesture that can bring it about. Kenneth W. Morgan told this story in the *NEW YORK TIMES* on January 30th, 1991. He wrote “Some years ago a tourist was exploring a market street in Damascus, Syria. He watched as a bicyclist balanced a crate of oranges on his handlebars. Suddenly, a porter appeared, so bent with a burden that he didn’t realize he was walking right into the path of the bicycle. SMACK! Well, the oranges went rolling down the street, the burden was dropped, and a war of words broke out between the 2 men as a crowd gathered. Then the bicyclist moved toward the porter with a clenched fist. Just then, a tattered little man slipped out from the crowd. He took the raised fist in his -- and kissed it. The cursing stopped. The 2 men relaxed, the crowd murmured approvingly. People began picking up the oranges. And the little man, who helped the healing to happen, melted back into the crowd.

We look at the war between Russia and Ukraine and we ask ourselves what can we do? It’s half a world away and we have no power. But we DO have the power of prayer, which eventually ended slavery in our country and brought down the Iron Curtain.

While we recognize that peace is a gift bestowed upon us by God, it is also something that we have to pray for with a deep sense of humility – and to be peacemakers in our world. An ancient native American story is a great illustration: “Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a coal mouse asked a wild dove. “Nothing more than nothing,” the dove answered. “In that case I must tell you a marvelous story,” the coal mouse said. “I sat on a fir branch close to the trunk when it began to snow. Not heavily, not in a raging blizzard. No, just like in a dream, without any violence at all. Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,471,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch – nothing more than nothing – as you say – the branch broke off.” Having said this, the coal mouse ran away.

The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on peace, thought about the story for a while. Finally, she said to herself, “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come to the world.”

We need to add our voices, prayers, and efforts to make peace happen in our families, church, country and world. We can’t just say it’s above our paygrade – we all have a part to play. Commitment is that quality of human nature that tells us not to count days or months or years, struggle or effort or rejection, but simply to go on until the work we have come to do is done, whether the need is finally, completely, finished or not. That can be finished by those who come after us. What is imperative to the honoring of a call, to the measuring of our vocation, is that we give our own life to the doing of it. May it be so for you and for me. Amen. (adapted from Joan Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 138-139)