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072212 The Fruit of Peace – The Spirit of Prayer
Psalm 139; John 2:23-27; 1 Corinthians 2

Jesus, in our reading today, promises the disciples the gift of peace. He tells them *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you”* (Jn 14:27). Then he tells them, at the end of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate and Comforter, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled.”* Among all the other things going on in this reading, the thing that stands out for me is the call to peace of mind and a calm heart. Peace of mind and a calm heart.

Do you have peace of mind right now? Is your heart calm? I don't have a lot of peace of mind today. Nor is my heart particularly calm. I have not yet figured out the art of not being caught up in the troubles of the day. I have not yet figured out how to let my heart approach conflict and difficulty calmly.

I have a good and close friend named Lisa. Lisa lives in Michigan and also came into the ministry as a second career. She graduated from seminary this year and was at the Annual Meeting in Minneapolis. She and I get along very well and share many qualities. Several years ago, she and I were on a walk in Los Angeles. We were there for a meeting and we were talking about things. One thing you should know about my friend Lisa – she hates drama. She has a low tolerance for it in her life and around her. Unfortunately, perhaps more than most people I know, however, Lisa is also a magnet for drama. All throughout her seminary experience – which was a long haul for her – she was confronted with sick kids, sick husband, lost jobs, financial problems, a phenomenal crisis in her home church, on and on and on.

So on our walk, I was asking her about the latest crisis which had arisen. We talked about prayer and ways of praying. Lisa said an interesting thing. She said, *“I used to spend a lot of time in prayer: praying for family, for friends, for my church, for health, for the world – all kinds of things. But I began to see that so much of my prayer life was taken up by what I wanted God to do the way I wanted it. So now my prayer life is very simple. I just pray for peace of mind and calmness to face whatever is coming to me in my life.”*

This struck me as very profound and I have remembered it ever since. When I am overwhelmed and my prayer life begins to become a list of demands for God to follow and obey, I remember my friend Lisa and just start praying for peace of mind and a calm heart, or equanimity, as it used to be called.

If peace is truly a gift and fruit of the Holy Spirit, and I believe it is, then we only really truly begin to understand peace in the context of our prayer life. This could be said for all the fruits of the Spirit, but more than any of the others, we must first come to some sense of peace in ourselves and in our lives before we can really be peace-filled creatures in the world.

In prayer we are deepening our relationship with God. That is primarily what prayer is all about – getting to know God better and allowing God, by way of the Holy Spirit, to know you. The fruit of peace is an outcome of our life of prayer, and we know our relationship with God is deepening when we are of peaceful mind and calm heart. But if you are like me, what little peace of mind I have achieved is easily overwhelmed and swamped when I am surrounded by difficulty and trouble. Whether that trouble be in the form of personal difficulties, the behavior of other people or the state of the world, particularly and generally, our hold on this fruit, and perhaps all of them, is fragile and tentative.

Peace of mind and a calm heart are really only possible when we acknowledge one primary thing. We must acknowledge the power of God and God's sovereignty, God's power and control and presence. We have to acknowledge this over and over and over again. There will never be a point where we will finally 'get it'. There is no real moment when we can stop giving over to God all the control of our lives and the power we

want. There is no end to this work. But there are moments of recognition, glimmers of the freedom available to us in a life led by God. This can only occur if we put ourselves in a position to give over our power and control to God. And we do that in prayer, together and individually.

Psalm 139 speaks to the depths of God's power and presence in our lives.

***1** O LORD, you have searched me and known me!*

***2** You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

***3** You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

***4** Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.*

In prayer, we are giving over to the one who has made us and formed us, even before we ourselves knew we were being made and formed. In prayer, we are recognizing and experiencing what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 2, the interpretation of spiritual things. By acknowledging and releasing our own drives and egos and needs to the sovereignty of God alone, we can begin to live into Jesus' prayer for us. He prays that *"we know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you"* (Jn 14:20). We can participate in God's sovereignty because now, by way of the Holy Spirit, it is really *"no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"* (Gal 2:20).

Two weeks ago, I said the Holy Spirit will not force herself upon you. God and Christ do not act by way of coercion. God's love is not really love unless it is freely chosen. Humans are stubborn creatures, though. We are fallen and broken creations of a powerful God. Hebrews 10 says, *"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of a living God"* (Heb 10:13). We want to be the masters of our own domains. We want to expiate our own sins. We want to be the makers of our own lives. We want to do it ourselves and do it alone. We want to earn the love that is freely given to us by God through Jesus Christ.

The terrifying thing about falling into the hands of the Living God is the acknowledgment that we are not the masters of our domains. We cannot in any way expiate our own sins. God finally is the one who defines, builds, creates and determines our lives. We cannot do it ourselves and most certainly cannot do it alone. And the free gift of the Holy Spirit for those who would simply open themselves to receive her is something you or I have certainly not earned in any way, shape or form.

So we have to make room for the Holy Spirit. If you want to experience the fruit of peace which the Holy Spirit so willingly gives, you must make room for her to be in your life. 1 Corinthians 2 says, *"For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. **11** For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. **12** Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God."* Are you willing to make room for the Spirit of God to search you? Do you have room for the Holy Spirit to search you? Or have conflicts and interior battles made your mind a chaotic field of clashing thoughts? Have the storms of life made your heart a stormy sea with no break in the clouds as far as you can see?

Perhaps now is a good time to realize what the Psalmist has known for all these centuries.

***7** Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?*

***8** If I ascend to heaven, you are there!*

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

***9** If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,*

***10** even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.*

***11** If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"*

***12** even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.*

***13** For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*

***14** I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.¹
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*

Often, and more often than some of you like, I remind you that there is nothing you can do to earn your salvation, there is nothing you can do to make yourself good enough to receive God's love. Sometimes I make it seem as if you should do nothing at all. I don't mean to imply it. It is just that we are often so focused on the 'me' parts of the faith, we forget the 'God' parts of it. Americans are very good at that. But here, in our discussion of the fruit of peace, there is something you can do. If you desire to have a taste of the fruit of peace, to get a sense of the positive force of the Kingdom of God, rather than of peace as humans define it (the absence of war, conflict and difficulty), then you need to either relinquish your known and direct participation in sinful and evil things, or you need to rise above the sin and evil which surrounds you.

Peace of mind is not possible when we are actively participating in acts which directly impact the peace and well-being of others. This is not a one-shot deal. We must give those acts up over and over and over again. Peace of mind and a calm heart are also not possible when we allow ourselves to be dragged into the sin and brokenness which is all around us. It does no one any good when we ourselves become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the sin which is around us. We cannot wade into the mess of human existence with the light of Christ if the light of Christ has been occluded in our own lives. The author Craig Barnes puts it this way: "*The work of Jesus Christ in our lives is to restore the divine image, which has become so distorted that it can no longer be recognized. The distortion came about by our attempts to cram other images into our souls, which made it impossible for us to remember who we were created to be.*" (quoted in "Moving down in the world" by Frank G. Honeycutt, *The Christian Century*, dated July 11, 2012).

A crowded, chaotic mind and troubled heart is the result of 'cramming other images into our souls'. We become beholden to images and ways of being which distort our souls and destroy our memory of who we were meant to be in the eyes of God. So whether you are participating in the fallenness of humankind, or you are overwhelmed by the fallenness of humankind, the solution is the same. Let God give you peace. Let Christ show you the meaning of a calm heart and peace of mind. Let the Holy Spirit search your depths in such a way that God's great power and presence are all you know. Just as Paul allowed himself to know only Christ and him crucified in his preaching to the Corinthians, so also we allow ourselves to know only God's power and presence in our lives. Like Paul, it may, and probably should, fill you with fear and trembling. The words you speak may sound foolish. Your personal needs and desires may fall quickly by the wayside. It may, finally, seem that all your prayers are really only a need on your part to control God.

Soon, though, we see that it is only God who is in control. Then, we might take the risk and say to God, *“Try me, and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Ps 139:23-24). Then, once we have allowed the Holy Spirit to search our depths, all we can really pray for is a calm heart and the fruit of peace.

May it be so for each one of us, in the presence of God, his only Son, Jesus Christ and their gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.