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## Peace and Believing in a Scary World

Psalm 67  
John 14:22-29

Memorial Day was first celebrated, as Decoration Day, in the years following the Civil War. On May 5, 1868, General John A. Logan, leader of an organization for Northern Civil War veterans, called for a nationwide day of remembrance later that month. "The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land," he proclaimed.<sup>i</sup> So bitter were the losses in that Civil War that Southerners continued to observe a day for the same purpose on a different day until after WW1 (and some on beyond that).

Memorial Day is a national holiday, not a Christian one. But as I was thinking of those families who have, throughout the years, sent children off to defend our nation and have never seen them again, I wondered why remembering the terrible cost of war has not slowed our warring pace. And, as we read the papers, we hear the frightening sound of sword upon sword again threatening the lives of those we hold dear. And these days, conflicts where life is lost don't have to be well defined and constitutionally declared wars. My husband, Eric, works for all of the state wide police agencies in S.C. Last week he sponsored a training in which 24 mental health professionals were trained in a therapeutic technique that is specifically for helping people unhook from traumatic experiences. Post-traumatic stress is a byproduct of traumatic events in which the brain, being so affected by the trauma, can be easily triggered by random events, smells, sights or feelings and be unwillingly transported back to the stress of the original traumatic event. He sponsored this training because he works with so many people who are dealing on a daily basis with past traumatic events and he needs more people trained in this technique for treatment.

So, even without a declared war, soldiers and firefighters and police and our national and state guard are regularly called into duty in ways that are life-threatening and trauma causing. And many who have served our nation, return home changed by the trauma they have seen and lived. And as I was thinking about the people that we know who have experienced life as uncertain and scary, I heard Jesus' words to his disciples very differently than I had heard them before.

Consider the context of our passage. Jesus gathers his disciples together before the Jewish festival of Passover and he washes their feet, which is unsettling to Simon Peter who objects. Then, Jesus tells his disciples that one of them will betray him, and Judas Iscariot leaves to do just that. Then, Jesus gives the remaining disciples a new commandment that they are to love one another. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” Jesus says. (Jn 13:35) There is anxious discussion and the disciples are worried and do not understand, or do not want to understand what Jesus is telling them. Thomas objects, and Philip asks for directions and clarity. Jesus speaks words of assurance and promise. “I will not leave you orphaned” or alone Jesus promises. And he tells the disciples that they and all those who love him will see him again. And another Judas (John says “not Iscariot) asks Jesus what that means and why Jesus will not reveal himself to the whole world so that everyone will know who he is.

I get Judas’ question. We – like the first disciples – want everyone to know God, to love God, and to follow God. It might also be that the disciples are a little afraid of being unsuccessful and want public vindication. If they have given themselves to following Jesus and he suddenly is killed, then where does that leave them? They want to know that they are right, not alone and that their faith has not been misplaced.

And Jesus then speaks the words we read about loving him, obeying him and knowing him. He promises to send the Holy Spirit and he promises to give peace. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (Jn 14:27)

So, wait a minute! In less than 24 hours, the disciples’ whole world is going to fall apart. Jesus will be arrested, the disciples will scatter, Peter will deny him, and the next time they are all together it is to grieve Jesus’ death by crucifixion. Jesus promises presence and peace a few hours before all hell breaks loose. Jesus is not saying these words to the disciples and to us as he tucks us into a warm secure bed. Jesus is calling us to love, to trust and obey his words and to resist fear when he has already told us that the world is about to come unhinged.

And looking at this passage in this way, my first thought was, “what sort of promise is this?! Jesus, what do you mean, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled!”? We live in a scary world, where people are targeted, tortured, killed and where no one is safe. Doesn’t Jesus know that this world is uncertain, dangerous and one can be killed for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Doesn’t Jesus know that the world is scary and terrible things really do happen? Doesn’t Jesus know that love, trust and obedience are good -when things are secure and we are not at risk of war, or death, or worse?

And, that’s when it dawned on me. Jesus does know what is about to happen. Jesus has told us that he will be betrayed and killed! And in the few hours that are left before the

bottom drops out of normal as the disciples knew it, Jesus tells them to trust, to love, to obey and not to be troubled or afraid.

I am not minimizing the terror and danger that exists in the world. The grief of losing a child, a spouse or a friend in an armed conflict is real. The possibility that our lives could end violently or unexpectedly is real. Life is uncertain. The world is dangerous.

AND – God rules the whole universe and oversees all the nations – as Psalm 67 reminds us. So, the choice to which Jesus calls us is to LOVE and to obey SO THAT we will be able to have faith, peace, understanding and the power of the Holy Spirit WHEN THE BOTTOM DROPS OUT. The context for the discipleship that Jesus here calls us to live is chaos, evil, betrayal, danger and death.

When Jesus is arrested, Jesus calls the disciples to trust, to love, to obey. When he is crucified as a common criminal, Jesus expects his followers to love, to trust and to obey. Faith is not something that we live when it suits us and when life is good. Faith is a counter-cultural choice when those we love are killed overseas, and when tragedy strikes those in our own families, and when evil comes and snatches away all that is important to us.

There is this amazing circular path to which Jesus called the first disciples and to which you and I are also called. And the order of operations is very important.

First, no matter our context or situation, you and I are called to love. We do not obey God so that God will love us. We love God and out of that love obedience grows. By this everyone will know that we are Jesus' disciples (Jn 13:35) And because we love – God, self and others – we show that love by being obedient to God's commands. And when we are obedient to God out of love, then we will have assurance, peace, understanding and receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

There are some truths that may not be known until after we commit ourselves to them. There are some things that are impossible for us to understand until we absolutely commit to them. I realized, studying this passage, that believing and peace are impossible until we commit to love and to obey God – regardless of what the world is doing to us.

Maybe it is a silly example, but we both know that we cannot float in the water until we get into the water, lay back and commit ourselves. When we trust and pick our feet off of the bottom, then and only then can the water hold us up. If we stand on the side and talk about floating, worry about floating, tell others that we can float, but never get into the water and pick our feet up off of the bottom, then we are lying.

Maybe a better example of this truth is that love – itself – may not be known as long as we guard our hearts and keep our distance. To know love, we must commit ourselves,

refuse to hold back, and instead give ourselves to love. And we must always do that – give ourselves to love – when we are not certain of the outcomes. Even if we fear we may be hurt, love can only be known when we commit to it.

To know God fully, to love God, to gain peace and assurance and to have the power of the Holy Spirit, we must commit ourselves fully to God. If we talk about faith and worry about faith and say we want to have more faith, but we will not give ourselves to love and obedience fully and completely, then we are lying about our faith.

There is only one path to peace and believing: trusting and obeying God. This is the faith cycle that Jesus here describes – just before he is arrested, tried and crucified – We are to love God just as God has loved us, and then keep Jesus' command to love one another so that we will know God in this way. So the cycle continues: love -> obedience -> Peace/understanding/Holy Spirit -> Love -> obedience -> Peace/Understanding/Holy Spirit. This cycle repeats and repeats and repeats. That is the only way to peace and believing in a scary world.

At the end of the passage we read, Jesus says, "I am telling you all about this before it happens so that when it does happen you may believe." (Jn 14:29)

On this weekend, when we weep for all those who have died in wars and we fear what the future may bring, we are to love and to obey so that we may have peace, assurance, belief and the power of the Holy Spirit. And when chaos comes, and our world is turned upside down, then we will be prepared and able to love and to obey so that we may have peace, assurance, belief and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/memorial-day-history>