

June 24, 2018 • Scholarship Sunday

The Peace That Passes Understanding

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"



This is one of my favorite days of the year here at Santa Monica First. It is thrilling to see the people whose lives are so tangibly and generously and lovingly impacted by the gifts of these scholarships. And how very grateful and inspired we all are at the generosity and dedication of all those who have established scholarships, whose generosity and vision reach out to this generation of students and generations yet to come in support of education, profession and vocation. Thanks be to God!

This support of education is a mark of being Methodist. Remember--the Methodist renewal movement began on a university campus. John Wesley was an Oxford don who lectured at the university. His first groups of Methodists were fellow students.

No wonder that during his own ministry, Wesley was instrumental in starting schools all over Britain. Here in the States, as the early circuit rider preachers traversed the land to bring people the Word of God's amazing grace, they also distributed Bibles and books as they went. They had virtually no possessions of their own. Instead, their saddle bags were packed with books and with Methodist periodicals.

Those early preachers also knew that they needed to be teachers. So in addition to the gift of God's love, they gave people the gift of literacy, reading. And we, the people called Methodist in this congregation carry on this legacy even to this very day. We continue to support Sunday School for children and youth. Our study groups, the Lectionary Bible Study, and our Book Study carry on this tradition. We host the Destination Science program each summer. We maintain our fabulous Library, updated through contributions from many of you as part of Annika Dodd's Girl Scout Silver Award project. Our widely popular Pop-Up Library spreads our love of reading throughout our neighborhood. Our excellent and accredited Preschool witnesses to and carries on this commitment. Recognized as one of the finest in this area, our school has, since 1948, nurtured hundreds of children and their families.

And that's just this one United Methodist congregation. Through the larger church connection, through mission projects all across this country, in rural areas and in our cities, and all across the world, Methodist missionaries teach literacy for children and for adults. From nursery schools all the way through schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries, the Methodist church makes excellent education accessible. And we should also be among the loudest voices demanding support for teachers and excellent education for all students at every level.

But still, the early Methodist teachers--John and Charles Wesley and the circuit riders, were preachers first. The learning they promoted was not intended for the mind only, but for the heart and the soul. We Methodists value not only knowledge, but faith in the love and power and peace of God.

So I want to address a few thoughts this morning especially to our amazing students as you commence or pursue your studies, though surely they apply to us all, at whatever stage we find ourselves in life's journey.

Across these last few weeks, I've been reading excerpts from various Commencement addresses given at colleges and universities across the country. Ronan Farrow, investigative reporter at the New Yorker magazine, said this to graduates here at Loyola Marymount: "You will face a moment in your career, [your life], when you have absolutely no idea what to do—where it will be totally unclear to you what the right thing is for you, for your family, for your community. And I hope, in that moment, you'll be generous with yourself, but trust that inner voice. Because more than ever, we need people to be guided by their own senses of principle—and not the whims of culture that prizes ambition, and sensationalism, and celebrity, and vulgarity and doing whatever it takes to win."

At Harvard University's Class Day, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, admonished the graduates: "Whether you are the leader or whether you are the led, I urge you to always bend toward truth. To err on the side of truth."

The challenge is: how do you make space and keep quiet enough to hear and recognize your inner voice? How do you get clear on your own sense of principle? How do you stay so focused on truth that your every word and action will bend towards it?

This is the spiritual work that we sometimes neglect in the midst of classes, exams, stress, exhaustion, or the exhilaration of learning, or just life as we know it.

In the story we hear this morning from Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches us this very lesson. You see, these spiritual challenges are not new to us. Jesus' very first disciples faced the same temptation. Jesus had spent the day amidst a large crowd, teaching. It was like a huge classroom, except that it was outside by the sea, and there were about a kazillion people there, and they all wanted to hear every word and not miss anything of what he was saying. By the end of the day, he must have been exhausted, and the disciples, too. So he said to them, 'let's get outta here and find some peace and quiet.' They got into the boat to sail to the other side, leaving the crowd and the commotion behind.

BUT...you heard it...a huge windstorm came up and the waves were crashing over their boat. While all this was going on, Jesus slept calmly. The panicked disciples woke him up: "Don't you care that we're drowning," they shouted? "Do something!"

Did you catch what he did? He said these words: "Peace. Be still." And the winds and waves died down. And to his disciples he said: "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

The disciples were filled with awe and wonder. "Who is this," they asked, "that even the wind and sea obey?"

In this moment, Jesus, the Messiah, our Savior, shows his disciples, he shows us, how, in the midst of all the craziness that school and work and nature and life can throw at us, how to focus back in on the faith that is within us, how to get quiet and hear our inner voice, how to abide in that peace that passes understanding as he calls it, the peace of God.

Let me suggest a few spiritual practices that can assist us in hearing our inner voice, staying clear on our own sense of principle, and aligning our lives with truth:

Begin every day with a focus on God. One Methodist layperson puts it this way: "it sets my focus and lifts my joy in the Lord to view every action and interaction with a sense of divine potential. My heart and mind are ready to respond to opportunities to speak and/or show God's love."

Remember the stories of Jesus and the teaching of the Scriptures that you have learned. Keep them in your heart, which is the center of knowledge and of moral decision-making. For example, we can put ourselves into the Gospel story we heard this morning and make it ours. We can recognize the ways we are just like those first disciples who panic when life gets scary and overwhelming. And then, from the story, we hear Jesus' words as if he's speaking directly to us. "Don't be afraid. I am with you always. Be still. Peace be with you."

Find some moments and a place apart for prayer. Remember—prayer isn't so much about telling God things God already knows. As one writer says: "It's mostly about emptying your head and waiting for stuff to become clear...to shut up for a while and think...holding people [and everything going on around you] in a kind of compassionate concentration..." a time to hear your inner voice, to dwell in the peace of God, and let God guide your thoughts and actions and words in the path of truth.

To our scholarship recipients today, I want to say: May God's full blessings be upon you as you pursue your studies and expand your minds. As you learn, as you grow, as your knowledge increases, may your love and knowledge of God increase as well. May you use your knowledge and the privilege it affords to serve others and may whatever privilege and status you attain through these pursuits enable you to give back more generously to those still in need. May you live more faithfully and more boldly.

And now may the Lord of peace give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you. AMEN

Notes:

Commencement speeches quotes from The New York Times, June 30, 2018.

Greg English, quoted in "Faith undergirds attitudes, actions in the workplace." Kathy Noble. The Interpreter Magazine, September/October 2017.

Jonathan L. Walton. "Seeing as God Sees: Putting on the lenses of love." Excerpted in The Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Spring/Summer 2018.

Giles Fraser. "Prayer is not wishful nonsense. It helps us shut up and think." The Guardian, March 23, 2017.

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