

# A Separate Peace

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*Text: John 14:23-29*

What brings you peace?

Is it nature? Is it the sighing breeze in the new green leaves? The trickle of water over rocks in a stream? The roaring of ocean waves that continues to sound in your mind hours after you've left the beach? Do these things bring you peace?

What brings you peace?

Is it harmony in your relationships? Is it sitting down at a table with a friend, while the world around you melts away? Is it gathering your family in from all the far-flung places they live to nest together again, if only for a few sweet days? Is it returning to a spouse, a lover after time spent apart—an embrace that feels like home? Is that what brings you peace?

What brings you peace?

Is it the satisfaction of doing something well? Is it the mountain vista after the long climb? The chest of drawers whose wooden boards you planed and joined, whose knobs you shaped on the lathe, that will last the days of your children and grandchildren? Is this peace?

Today Jesus talks about peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you," he says, but then he qualifies, he clarifies: "I do not give to you as the world gives."

What is peace? What sort of peace does Jesus leave us? And how is it different, what makes it separate and distinct, from what the world gives?

Jesus is speaking with his disciples in the Upper Room, on the night when he is to be arrested. And in case it wasn't clear, the fact that Jesus keeps saying things like, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," means that they are feeling the opposite of peace. Their fellowship has been shattered by a betrayal—Judas has left the table where they broke bread and gone to bring the Temple police to capture his teacher. And Jesus has begun to talk about going away. This is a time of heartbreak and high anxiety for his friends. Peace... peace is what they need.

Peace is what we need. Last weekend's shooting in Buffalo reminded us that we continue to be vulnerable to gun violence. The shooter's writings, seething with the rhetoric of white supremacy, reminded us that the racial hatred infused into our media and politics boils over again and again—in Christchurch, New Zealand, in El Paso, in Pittsburgh, in Charleston—in ways that harm neighbors who are Jewish or Muslim or people of color. Like those disciples, my heart is troubled and afraid. Maybe yours is too.

What does it mean for Jesus to give peace, peace that is different from anything else on offer?

Jesus didn't use our word, "peace." He didn't even use the Greek word written in John's gospel, "eirene." When Jesus spoke with his disciples about peace, he spoke in the Aramaic language, and he drew on the understanding of their shared Jewish tradition. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, peace is *shalōm*. It's a versatile

word. It means “hello,” and “goodbye” — what a wonderful way to greet someone! It means “health.” Shalōm is not just the absence of conflict, but fullness of well being. The Talmud even considers Shalōm to be one of the names of God.

In our language, the word “peace” sometimes takes on a negative meaning. Sometimes in the chaos that comes with living with 2 kids and a dog, I find myself saying, “Can’t I get some peace and quiet?!” Peace sometimes means the absence of noise, of conflict, of worry. Not so with *shalom*. *Shalom* is the Sabbath, a day of rest and enjoyment. *Shalom* is the health of the body, the family, and the community. *Shalom* is the storm stilled, the raging waves calmed, and all the wild forces of nature quiet and at ease. *Shalom* is peace, not as the absence of disruption, but peace as the fullness of health, justice, prosperity, joy, and harmony between God, people, and all the creatures.

This is the peace that Jesus promises.

“I do not give to you as the world gives,” Jesus says. How is Jesus’ peace different?

There was an island nation in the Caribbean, whose people had thrown off the shackles of their enslavement, risen up, and won their freedom. One day a fleet of warships appears off the coast, and an envoy brings a message: If you want peace, you must pay. Pay back those who enslaved you for their losses. This is the story of Haiti, the first modern nation founded by formerly enslaved people, and it appears in a long-form piece in today’s *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> Read this story and the history it tells, and you can find out about the extortion of \$21 billion that might have set this nation on a different path, if they had been allowed to keep it and build, educate, develop like other nations. What do the nations who benefited, who continue to benefit from this act of piracy — France, mainly, but also the United States — what do these nations owe today to the impoverished descendants of those we robbed and plundered?

In any case, this is an extreme example of something that is true in general: the world gives peace at a cost. You must pay for your freedom. You have got to pay for security. Peace has a price.

The religious establishment in Jerusalem bought peace with Rome at the price of the life of an innocent man, Jesus. The suffering of innocent people is often the price of peace as the world gives.

We buy peace, sometimes, at the price of suppressing our hurts, swallowing our discontent, so as not to cause trouble. We do it in our personal relationships. And we do it as a people, when we refuse to teach our children the difficult stories about our past, tying our nation’s history up in a tidy little package with a bow, with all the ambiguities and imperfections tucked safely away. Maybe if I cover the wound, it disappears. Maybe if I say it doesn’t hurt, it won’t. But maybe, just maybe concealing the sources of our pain only makes it harder to heal.

When we buy peace, it may yield the absence of conflict, but it will never be the fullness of justice. It is not *shalom*. It is not what Jesus promises. “I do not give to you as the world gives,” he says.

Jesus has in mind something more enduring.

I was talking just recently with someone who had been living with friends — good, close friends — for a couple of years, and now that season of life had passed. And they could still be friends, still see each other, but they weren’t living together anymore, and so something good, something profound, had been lost. And they were all feeling it and mourning it together.

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Rios, “The Ransom. The Root of Haiti’s Misery: Reparations to Enslavers.” *New York Times*, 22 May 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>. Accessed 5/22/2022.

There is something about living in the same space, seeing someone from day to day, that is special. Your co-workers get to see you at your polished best. Your social-media friends get to see your packaged and filtered self-branding. But the family or friends you live with—they get to see your hair when you wake up in the morning, deal with your clutter, witness your last-minute hurry and panic, eavesdrop (intentionally or not) on your phone calls. Whether or not you planned it this way, there is an intimacy that comes when you live together with someone. And don't get me wrong, sometimes that closeness can drive you absolutely insane—but for the person I was speaking with, I got the sense that this intimacy with friends was lifegiving and deeply precious.

And it's this intimacy that Jesus promises those who keep his word, who keep the commandment we heard about last week, the commandment to love each other and our neighbors just as Jesus loved us. Jesus and the God he calls Abba, Father, "will come to them and make our home with them," he says.

What would it be like to live with the persons of the Godhead? What sort of roommates would they be? I get the sense they would be the kind of roommates you would be sad to lose.

What brings you peace?

Is it when you are seen, known, and accepted just as you are, in spite of your mussed hair and dirty dishes? Is it when, whatever the day may have done to you, however you may have fallen down or failed others, whatever hurts you might have suffered, there is someone waiting at home who will throw their arms around you and make it all right? Is it someone whose love will draw out your better self?

You have just such a roommate, a partner, a companion to come home to, always. And sometimes he'll use your voice to offer that same gift of love, forgiveness, healing to others. And sometimes you'll need to hear that voice coming through someone else. "Those who love me will keep my word," Jesus says. It's not an exchange, not a bargain, not tit-for-tat, but mutuality, love. We are most aware of the peace Jesus promises when our lives vibrate at the frequency of unconditional love. And when we are grounded in his peace, our lives sing more joyously with love for our neighbors.

There's a lot that's distressing about the time we're living in, the kind of world we inhabit. There's much to make our hearts troubled and afraid. But there's also a gift of peace, a place to inhabit as the storms rage all around. Hold on to love, live it out, and God will dwell with you always. Amen.