

“The First Gift of Easter”
May 1, 2022

John 20:19-23

I’m guessing a number of you have either read the children’s book or seen the movie, *The Polar Express*. Every year at Christmas time, it’s a must watch and/or a must read in our house. In any case, near the end of the movie, there’s a scene where the young boy, who is the main character in the story, winds up in the center of the square at the North Pole surrounded by the train conductor, his young friends, and countless elves.

The atmosphere at the North Pole is electric and the anticipation builds as everyone waits for Santa Claus to make his appearance. As soon as everyone spots Santa’s massive, telltale shadow, deafening applause ensues, and Santa makes his triumphant entrance on the scene. The reindeer are ready to go, literally jumping up and down with excitement. And Santa assumes the driver position atop his sleigh, ready to set off into the Christmas Eve night.

But first, according to the storyline, there’s a tradition at the North Pole. Someone in the crowd is invited to come forward and request from Santa the first gift of Christmas. Much to his surprise, the young boy is chosen for this honor and when he climbs up to Santa’s lap he whispers his wish in Santa’s ear. Santa is pleased and more than happy to oblige and to fulfill the young boy’s request, Santa lifts up a shiny, silver bell that had fallen off one of the reins on his reindeer.

Holding the sparkling bell high up in the air for everyone to see, Santa bellows in a loud voice, “the first gift of Christmas.” And while everyone in the square breaks out cheering, Santa offers the bell to the young boy as a once in a lifetime gift.

That scene in *The Polar Express* came to my mind this week as I read through this morning’s Scripture lesson. In this morning’s Gospel verses, the disciples are gathered together in fear, closed off in a secret location behind locked doors. It was Sunday evening and all of a sudden, the Risen Christ came and stood among them. And the very first thing Jesus said was, “Peace be with you.”

A short time later, after showing his friends the nail holes in his hands and feet, Jesus offered the same exact reassurance. I had never thought about it much prior to this past week, but it seems to me like the first gift of Easter is crystal clear. Gathered with his friends as Easter night fell, Jesus held up his arm and offered them a blessing. “Peace be with you.”

The first gift of Easter, the resurrection gift Jesus Christ offers, is peace. And just as it was for the disciples, it’s up to you and me to accept the gift of peace in the blessed, hope-filled spirit Christ offers it to us...

For all the talk about “love” in the Bible, both in and beyond the Easter story, it’s surprising how comparatively little the Bible speaks about “peace.” No doubt, there’s a lot to be said for love and how much we need to give it and receive it. By the same token, there’s a huge amount to be said, particularly in this violent, conflict fueled world in which we live, for simply being allowed to live.

The problem is that the notion of “peace” often comes with qualifiers. (1) And two of the qualifiers you hear about most often are these. First, peace is boring. Violence is much more exciting. Violence and conflict capture the bulk of the headlines in our world and the bulk of our attention. There’s nothing like good old-fashioned aggression and hostility to get our blood pumping. And if there’s a healthy dose of cruelty and bloodshed added to the mix, so much the better.

Second, peace is too broad and too complex. Therefore, it’s overwhelming. We don’t know where to start or how to make a difference, so we tend to sit on the sidelines. It’s much easier, and much more effective, we convince ourselves, if we just leave the whole peace thing to people who are professionals.

Of course, those two qualifiers are easy to poke holes in. Peace might be boring for the people who are engaging in the violence. But it’s never boring for those who are trying to avoid violence. And if we’re ever inclined to leave peacemaking to the professionals, we need only look at the death of Jesus on the cross as a case in point for why professionals don’t always get it right.

In the world in which we live, you and I may not have a grand vision of peace. By the same token, you and I might be skeptical whether anyone in our world has a grand vision of peace. But there is always something to be said for taking small steps toward peace. It might not be “world peace,” but we could call it “minor peace.” And there is no one better equipped and more clearly called to carry out minor peace than people of the church like each one of us.

When one of us takes the time to respond to a put down or a sarcastic or cruel remark with a measure of kindness, we’re contributing to peace. When one of us refuses to strike back the moment someone offends us or lashes out at us, we are modeling peace. When one of us reaches out to a stranger or an enemy and offers them a word of welcome, we are promoting peace. And when you and I do all of those things, we build our way ever closer to God’s peaceful, beloved community here on earth...

In his novel, *The Blood of the Lamb*, (pg. 232-38) Peter DeVries tells of a family whose little daughter is dying of leukemia. One evening, the father comes to the hospital and his little girl is excited because she’s watched an old Laurel and Hardy movie. She says to her father, “the neatest thing was when the little man threw a pie into the face of the big man. I was scared because I didn’t know what the big man was going to do. But guess what? He didn’t hit back! He waited for the longest time and then slowly began to wipe the custard from his eyes.”

A few days later, the little girl's birthday came around and the father had a very special cake made and decorated for his daughter. There was a church between the parking garage and the hospital and, as he so often did, the father stopped on his way to the hospital room to pray for his daughter. That morning, in the aisle of the church, the father encountered one of the nurses who worked on the hospital floor where his daughter was staying.

The nurse approached the father and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Did you get the message?" "What message?" the father responded.

"A terrible staph infection is sweeping the whole floor," she replied. "The children's resistance is low. You'd better get up there."

In a hurry, the father rushed out of the sanctuary and left the cake in the pew. And when he arrived at the hospital, he realized that this complication would be the final blow. Within hours, his daughter died. Stricken with grief, the man left the hospital and headed for his car. But just when he was about to drive home, he remembered the birthday cake. And he went back and found the cake on the pew exactly as he had left it.

One glance at his daughter's name written on top of the cake prompted tears to well up in the father's eyes. As he stumbled out of the sanctuary, the father passed a statue of Jesus hanging on the cross. And in a fit of rage, he impulsively took the birthday cake and threw it at the statue, watching as the cake struck Jesus in the face, right below the crown of thorns.

While his chest heaved with sobs and anger, it seemed to the father as though the Christ figure on the cross slowly extricated his hands from the nails and began to wipe the icing from his cheeks. When the father looked more closely, he was almost positive he saw tears in the eyes of Jesus, as if the little girl's death that had broken her father's heart was breaking Jesus' heart as well. As the father recalled the words of his daughter, here then was another big man on a cross, "taking it" from a little man and not hitting back. It wasn't much, a minor thing really, but the scene taught the father something about the nature of God...

This afternoon from two to four at our Peace Through Pies event here at Wapping Community Church, we're not going to be throwing pies at each other or at any images of Jesus people may see on our church property. Instead, through our sharing of pie and in our sharing with one another, our intent is to help each of us in this South Windsor community remember we don't have to hit back. We can welcome each other with open arms. We can choose kindness and hospitality. By sitting down with someone we know or someone we don't know we will take one concrete step to promote peace.

We live in a world that is saturated with violence and brutality and death. And as much as we might love to achieve peace on a larger scale, for God's sake and for our own sake, the peace that is readily available to you and me is more minor.

I hope you will come and have a piece of pie this afternoon where we'll talk more about it...Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., "Minor Peace" as printed in the book, *yes to peace: Sermons on the Shalom of God* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) pg. 36.

