

Our student intern TJ Mack delivered a sermon on October 18th based on Thessalonians 1:1-10. It was excellent, and we wanted to share it with you. Thank you, TJ. And to everyone else: “Gruss Gott!”

What do we do here, every week, right after the Children’s Time? We ‘pass the peace’. We say ‘peace be with you’, or ‘the peace of Christ be with you’, or simply ‘peace’.

Grace to you and peace – these are heartfelt words from Paul. These words are rooted with meaning from Paul’s Jewish heritage as indicated in today’s Exodus passage. They are words from our 3500 year old tradition of Moses and his people. Words that Paul was introducing to his people, some 1500 years later. It is estimated that Paul wrote this letter from Corinth sometime around the year 50, in this, the Common Era.

Paul knew the Hebrew scriptures extremely well. By all accounts he was a well-educated and observant Jew, right up until his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Saul the Jew, persecutor of those Jews following Jesus, became Paul, champion of Jesus and his teaching. He committed his life to teaching and converting others to the Way of Jesus. Paul was preaching primarily to Gentiles who were, of course, unschooled in the Jewish Law. His greeting of grace and peace was a thread connecting himself and his people, to Moses and his people. A thread that still connects us to them.

Today’s Exodus passage includes Moses’ conversation with God, asking for reassurance of God’s favor ... Paul wants for his people; wants for all people, what God promised Moses and his people ... to be known by name, and to find favor in God’s sight, to be promised God’s peaceful presence in all times and places.

And Paul fully believes this promise to be true. That is the message Jesus brought. That is what Jesus taught. That is what Paul is teaching. It seems to me that ‘grace to you and peace’ is Paul’s shorthand for much, much deeper meaning from the scriptures.

According to the Hebrew scriptures, to have *Grace* was to be in God’s favor, to receive undeserved kindness and love from God.

Grace be with you is a prayerful greeting pregnant with hope ... May you be in God’s favor; may you

find favor with God.

Peace was believed to be caused by being in the presence of God. To have peace is to be made whole by God’s grace.

Grace and peace be with you. I think Paul’s words meant, ‘May you know the presence of God. May you become one with God; may you be made whole through God.’ Those words are powerful beyond measure.

Part of this ritual of greeting, of passing the peace, for me anyway, is to look in the other person’s eyes – to see them – and by doing so – to begin to connect with them; to love them. To attempt to see the other through the eyes of God. After all, it is God’s peace I am offering them; God’s peace we are offering each other.

If we see someone, truly see someone, how can we not begin – or continue – to love them?

In 1979 – Pat spent some time in Gunzendorf, Germany, visiting her brother and sister-in-law, who were stationed there for two years of his Army enlistment.

It was a small, rural village in Southern Bavaria. She remembers it having maybe 500 townfolk. And to this day, 45 years later, she remembers fondly the greetings that passed between the people living in that town, or those who happened to be visiting. When she would meet someone on the street they would exchange the words, “Gruss Gott”. Translation: “May God greet you” or simply, “*Greet God*”. That is beautiful! I greet God in you. You greet God in me. I see God in you. And likewise, you see God in me.

If we see each other, truly see each other, we are seeing God. According to this Exodus passage, we need to be in the cleft of the rock when GOD is passing by, because we are not capable of comprehending God in all God’s glory and beauty and mystery, thus God’s face shall not be seen; but we can see an image of God in the faces of each other. “Gruss Gott”. Greet God.

I have been particularly impressed with the greeting

that passes between Caleb, our grandson, and his teacher each day. At arrival and at departure, between all the teachers and all the students of the Ashwood Waldorf school in Rockport, there is a handshake. Significant eye contact is made. Words are spoken.

(handshake) [from the teacher] “Good morning (name). I am glad you are here. How are you?”

[from the student] “Good morning, Miss (name). I am well, thank you.”

So simple. So life affirming. So caring.

It is such a wonderful way to begin and end their school day. To see and be seen. To speak and be heard.

I have witnessed this greeting for many years (Caleb is in the sixth grade) but it is not until I was reading this greeting from Paul to the Thessalonians that it occurred to me that I too could begin and end my work day with this ritual greeting. And so I began ... (handshake) Good Morning (name)! How are you? I am glad you are here! And my co-workers looked at me like I was crazy! What are you doing? Why? I explained how much I liked the greeting between Caleb and his teacher. I explained that I was writing a sermon and I wanted to practice what I preached. Still they think I am crazy! It is very, very difficult where I work (and maybe where you work or volunteer) to offer this type of greeting. Not all people want to touch. Not all people want to make eye contact. Some people don't even want to engage in a simple 'hello'.

Why is it that I meet so much resistance at work, or anywhere, when offering a handshake and a few kind words? Oh sure, you can say they don't want to touch because they don't want to pass the germs. But I work in retail. We are touching people's hands and people's money all day long, it is unavoidable.

Touch. Eye contact. Do they require an honesty; an intimacy that we would rather avoid? I am guessing that it is not germs that we are most afraid of – but the messiness of life that some of us fear.

Yet, there is always a way ... when one wants to

connect with others. Have you heard of the Ebola handshake or the ABC's of Ebola? ABC – avoid body contact. Instead of a handshake, it is making eye contact and placing your hand on your heart. I see you. I greet you. I am connecting with you.

Are we going through our day with eyes open or eyes closed? Are we attempting to see or to avoid others? When it comes to seeing one another ... Who do we see? Who do we choose not to see?

Do I see the hitchhiker on the side of the road, week after week, trying to get home from Camden to Lincolnton? Or do I look away? What happens when I start to see him? When I stop for him? Do you know what he does when he gets in my car? He offers me his hand. He looks me in the eye. He tells me his name; that he has a son; that he does odd jobs for people. He has a terrible, terrible cough that thunders and rumbles in his chest each time I meet him. Gruss Gott. I see God in him; he sees God in me.

What happens if we take the practice of passing the peace out into the world? What happens if we 'greet God' in everyone we meet? It is a question Moses lived with. It is a question Paul lived with. It is a question I want to know the answer to. I am willing to risk being thought of as crazy, in order to find out. Some thought Jesus was crazy too. Isn't meeting God worth the risk? Will you take that risk with me?

“Gruss Gott.” Greet God.

Amen.

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