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## *"Peace Be with You!"--Really*

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In the name of God: our Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and Friend. Amen.

"Peace be with you!" And of course you say . . . "And also with you!" Of course that's what you say back. That's our tradition, and "we're proud of it!" So let's say it again: "Peace be with you!" "And also with you!" Now we've said it almost as many times as it occurs in the entire New Testament: 3 of those times right in today's gospel reading from John.

So we'll probably say it at least one more time before I'm done here, just to keep up with Jesus himself in today's gospel. That's what someone asked me about last week: Why does Jesus repeat that phrase so many times in today's gospel? Was it such a common phrase in the life and times of Jesus, or is there some special significance that we hear it three times in succession in this particular gospel appointed for today; the second Sunday of Easter?

Well, yes, and yes! Yes to "all the above." The phrase does translate a popular greeting in Hebrew that in Jesus' times would have sounded similar in his own language of Aramaic: shalom aleykhem. Among Muslims today of course you will still hear the similar sounding, Salam aleykum, meaning the same thing: "Peace be with you." Most often though most of us hear just the single word, "shalom" or maybe we'll venture to say "salaam" to a Muslim friend. But in any case we have an intuitive sense of what is meant when we either hear or say the word "Shalom." Its range of meanings include peace, well-being, safety, concord, health.

So again: Shalom, or "Peace be with you!" "And also with you!" There, we've said it our third time. Now as you might suspect the number three has symbolic significance in the Bible. This is particularly the case here at the end of John's gospel where Jesus makes three resurrection appearances to his group of disciples. Two of those appearances we hear about today--two according to John, not counting Luke's gospel and his "Road to Emmaus" story that we'll read about next Sunday. Now, it's in the third appearance that Jesus interrogates Peter three times after a marvelous fish breakfast on the sea shore. You recall that after the breakfast Jesus asks Peter three times in succession: "Simon, do you love me?" "Simon, do you love me?" "Simon, do you love me?"

But in today's gospel we have a different threefold repetition: "Shalom be with you." "Shalom be with you." "Shalom be with you." Is it possible that the purpose of the repetition is the same in each case? Many of us are familiar with the claim that just as Peter denied Jesus three times "on the night that he was betrayed," accordingly he had to answer the threefold repetition, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" But is it possible that the threefold repetition of "Peace be with you!" has the same purpose of reversing the disciples' collective denial of their allegiance to Jesus?

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Years ago before he became our current Archbishop of Canturbury, Rowan Williams the scholar wrote a book on Easter

and the resurrection appearances of Jesus called, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel. In that book he asks us to imagine the mental and emotional state the disciples would have been-in, following their betrayal and abandonment of Jesus just three days before these appearances began to occur. Remarkably, and contrary to what their guilt and shame would have predicted for them, the risen Jesus invites them back into table fellowship with him! Indeed, shalom is the attitude of peaceable welcome that Jesus offers his fallen disciples. And inviting them back into table fellowship, Rowan Williams adds, is the deep foundation of our own fellowship meal with Jesus at holy Eucharist" a fellowship meal that in most of our services begins with confessing that we too have betrayed our allegiance to him.

It's that tone of identity with all persons that some of us are striving for at our peace vigils on the Emory campus this year. I say "peace" vigils because that is what we call them. But on any given occasion they are at risk for becoming just antiwar demonstrations instead of peace vigils"vigilant occasions for shalom. The tension is always for people on opposite sides of any issue to polarize and then begin demonizing the other side. But what truth is there in calling them "'peace vigils' if they function only as warfare "by other means""in this case civil' warfare between peace advocates and their fellow citizens who support the war.

Walter Wink has called this attitude, "'becoming what you hate' (in his book, Engaging the Powers). Now this irony of becoming like the very figure that you oppose has a comic side that I hope you can enjoy with some amusement. According to one ancient source that phrase, "Peace be with you," was used by the overseer at the Temple in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus.

"The overseer of the Temple Mount went from shift to shift with lit lanterns, and if a watchman did not stand [when he appeared], the overseer said: Peace be upon you! [Shalom alekha!] If [the overseer found a watchman] was asleep [and thus did not answer, he then proceeded to] beat him with a stick." Accessed by this author on 3/28/08 at [www.forward.com/articles/9947](http://www.forward.com/articles/9947)

What's amusing""if indeed you find it so""is the contrast between the overseer's words of shalom followed by the very opposite of shalom in vicious attitude and actions. But maybe you don't find that story so amusing! So I've got another one for you. It's not actually a story but a slogan from the pirate movies that came to the theatres last summer and left us all with a lot of pirate "'loot' and accessories.

My favorite is the one that our Canon John Mark Wiggers has on a sticker attached to his commuter mug. It has the symbol of the skull and crossbones attached to it, and it says: "The beatings will continue until morale improves." Now, the irony of beating someone to improve their morale seems to me a hilarious absurdity, but unfortunately we all know situations that involve exactly that attitude. Call to mind for example that warning that you heard growing-up and that we still give to our children: "Stop crying! or maybe I'll give you something to really cry about."

Well, the truth is that none of these strategies of "'beating' each other is truly effective. We human beings have tried them for millennia and they continue to produce unreliable results, at best. But our Lord, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, model for us the alternative to all that""and that alternative is the gospel Good News of Easter. Following our betrayals and complicity in evil, the Lord does not beat us back into right relationship with him. Rather, he forgives and welcomes us back into right relationship with him. On this basis, Rowan Williams concludes, "the Church's life is a perpetual Easter, and its mission the universalizing of Easter." (Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel, Pilgrim, 1984; pp. 38; 40-41)

The "'good news' of this Easter mission is that just as God in Christ has invited us back into table fellowship and reconciliation with him, so we are inviting all people into a similar fellowship of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5.19-20).

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Here's a final illustration. A.J. Muste was the 20th century peace minister and union organizer who was active for decades in the peace organization literally called, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Muste is the focus of that legendary story about the newspaperman who was amazed to find him parading in front of the White House at night during the Vietnam War. He was found holding a candle in silent vigil when the incredulous reporter asked him if he really thought that carrying his little candle would change the government's policy on the war.

"Oh, I don't do this to change the country," Muste answered him. "I do this so the country won't change me."

Well, the little known A.J. Muste was also the man who coined that celebrated expression, "There's no way to peace; peace is the way." And I like to think that he learned that particular form of shalom decades before when he opposed WWI as an outspoken parish minister. Yes, born in 1885 Muste lived through two world wars as well as the beginning of the Vietnam War (1959-1975). Although he is hardly known today, when he died at the age of 82 in 1967 he was one of the century's most respected and experienced peace activists.

But it was as a young peace minister at Central Congregational Church, Newtonville MA . . . on Easter Sunday, April 25, 1918, that he preached on the futility of war shortly after one of the prominent sons of the church had been killed in World War I. Immediately following the service a congregational meeting was called that terminated Rev. Muste. He and his family had to move out of the church parsonage that very afternoon.

Accessed by this author on 3/29/08 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.\\_J.\\_Muste](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._J._Muste)

No, "'there is no way to peace; peace is the way,' and that means offering the option of shalom also to those whose policies and actions we oppose. How can we genuinely "'pass the peace' to each other when my inner attitude also involves a covert or not-so-covert effort to "'beat' you in some way or another? That is not the grace of God as we have learned it in Jesus Christ, whose Father "'makes the sun rise and shine on the just and the unjust alike.' More Christ-like is Marjorie Suchocki's formula of "'willing the well-being of both victim and victimizer in the fullest possible knowledge of the nature of the violation.' (This is her definition of forgiveness in her book, *The Fall to Violence*.)

But who is capable of this depth of shalom? Certainly Gandhi, King, Mother Teresa, and their followers have practiced resisting oppression in a way that seeks the liberation of the oppressor; that seeks his or her well-being too by always trying to leave an option for his or her honorable conversion. But at the end of the day, I believe, we must acknowledge that only God, or Jesus as our "'Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9.6), is capable of sustaining such shalom in every circumstance. Until then I invite you and me"'we together"'to keep rehearsing as often as we can by extending to one another the grace-filled attitude: "Peace be with you!" . . . And also with you! Let us pray (the Collect for today):

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

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