

My Peace I Give to You

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**John 14:
My Peace I Give To You**

One of the resources that I always recommend to couples who come in to see me for pre-marital counseling is a book entitled, Fighting for your Marriage, by Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg.

It is not a very romantic book. It doesn't include any of the usual drivel of advice that most books written for newlyweds focus on: things like the importance of keeping romance alive in your relationship, being honest with each other, being open, being willing to compromise.... Frankly, if you can't figure that stuff out on your own, you really have no business being married in the first place.

Somewhere between forty and fifty percent of marriages end in divorce today and we have some pretty good data about why. We know that the best predictors of marital success have little to do with love and a lot to do with conflict. Every marriage has conflict. Couples that are good at resolving conflict stay together, and couples that aren't, don't. It doesn't sound very romantic, but the truth is that if you want to improve the likelihood of enjoying a good and lasting marriage, then the best thing you can do is learn to fight right.

What I like about the book Fighting for Your Marriage, is that the authors do a good job pointing out the pitfalls that most of us stumble into when we argue.

We imagine that arguments are all about establishing who is right and who is wrong. If we can just convince our partner of the rightness of our position, then the conflict between us will be resolved and everything will be alright again. Just by a show of hands for those of you who are married, has it ever worked that way for you? Have you ever been able to resolve an argument by convincing your partner that you were right and they were wrong and everything was ok after that? Has your partner ever thanked you for setting them straight and pointed out the error of their ways?

There are two circumstances that I can think of when winning an argument actually matters: if you are on the high school debate team you score points for making really good arguments, or if you are in divorce court an impartial judge will listen to your best arguments and issue a ruling on custody and visitation of your dependent children and the distribution of your jointly held assets.

So if either of those two conditions applies to you, then by all means continue to make your arguments as forcefully and thoughtfully as you are capable of making them. But if your goal is to have a meaningful and lasting relationship with your partner, then you need to realize that arguments are never really about who is right and who is wrong. They are always about you and your partner's need to be heard, understood, and respected.

That is particularly true in marriage, but it is also true in every human relationship. The family therapist and poet, Virginia Satir, once wrote, "I believe that the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to

be seen by them, heard by them, to be understood and touched by them. The greatest gift I can give is to see, hear, understand, and to touch another person. When this is done, I feel contact has been made.”

One of the most beautiful and intimate moments that Jesus ever shared with his disciples was the time they spent together in an upper room on their last night together. This morning’s scripture reading from the 14th chapter of John is part of the text that tells us about that encounter.

It was anything but a peaceful moment. Tensions were high, tempers were hot, and conflict was escalating. The Pharisees and Sadducees were plotting to kill Jesus. The Zealots were trying to co-opt him into their movement and pressuring him to take up their cause for armed insurrection against the Roman occupiers. Everywhere Jesus went, more and more people were pressuring him to heal their diseases and exorcize their demons.

Even within Jesus’ own circle of trust, conflict was building. Judas was considering betraying Jesus in exchange for significant financial reward. James and John were lobbying for special status as Jesus’ right and left hand men. Peter was becoming increasingly apprehensive about their public exposure and safety. None of the disciples were feeling confident or encouraged by the direction things had taken since they had arrived in the City of David.

The gathering in the upper room had all the elements of a disaster waiting to happen. We would expect a lot

of blaming and finger pointing, accusations and denials, negativity, and second guessing. We would expect the tension and conflict to escalate into an all out brawl. But instead they shared one of the calmest and most intimate moments of their life together.

That night when they sat down at table together in an upper room, Jesus didn't even attempt to fix or save or advise or set anyone straight. Instead he touched them lovingly by kneeling down in front of each one of them and washing their feet and drying them with a towel. And he acknowledged their fears and insecurities. And he encouraged them to articulate their grief and sorrow.

And then, instead of telling them what to do or how to proceed, Jesus affirmed his confidence in his disciples. Even though he knew it would be their last night together, he didn't become frantic about taking care of all details that needed to be looked after. He didn't give them lists of things they should do or strategic plans they should follow to keep the movement alive. Instead Jesus assured his disciples that they already knew everything they needed to know. And he promised them that God would send them the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide them and to remind them of everything he had taught them. They didn't need anything more from him. They just needed to trust that God's Holy Spirit would continue to be alive in them: guiding, inspiring, and encouraging them as they continued the mission of reconciling the world in love.

In the midst of that highly charged and stressful set of circumstances, Jesus shared a beautiful, intimate

moment with his disciples and left them with these words: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives, therefore let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

For the past few weeks we’ve been reflecting on the writings of Parker Palmer in his book, A Hidden Wholeness. Palmer reminds us that the peace that Jesus offers to us isn’t dependent on the external circumstances of our lives. It isn’t a peace that comes only when things are going well, when life is calm, or when things are all working out just the way we want them to.

Real and lasting peace comes from being in community with a circle of friends who love and respect each other so much that they would never try to fix, or save, or advise, or set each other straight.

In his chapter entitled, “Learning to Speak and Listen,” Palmer writes, “When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul (away).”

Too often, out of our misguided efforts to help others, we feel obliged to tell them what we think they need to know and how we think they ought to live. But it is arrogant of us to assume that we know what is best for someone else, and it always leaves the other person feeling diminished and disrespected.

So next time you find yourself caught up in the heat of an argument with someone you really care about, instead of being preoccupied with scoring points and winning the debate, try stepping back for a moment and asking, “What is it that the other person really wants you to hear and understand and respect about them? And what is it that you really want your partner to hear and understand and respect about you?”

When those two things become clear to you, then you’ll be a lot closer to the peace that Jesus promised than you will ever get by winning the argument. Amen.

