

## THE PRESENCE OF PEACE

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Rev. Richard Maraj

So how many people have a busy life and really enjoy that you have a busy life? Okay. How many people have a busy life and wish it wasn't so busy a life? [Congregation laughs] Okay. So they say that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, but I think it's one of the busiest, one of the most hectic and stressful times of the year. I mean, as soon as Thanksgiving is over, it's like the floodgates of Christmas just bust. And from the Black Friday sales, the race is on to see if we can get things finished in time for the big day.

When you think about all the things that need to be done for Christmas. I mean, there's the decorating of the trees; the putting up of the light; and doing the cards; and shopping; and caroling; and concerts; and cookies; and candle lighting services; family visits; parties. How many people have ever been invited to so many events and parties and had so many opportunities, but you didn't have the time to do them all at Christmas ... but you still tried to cram them in. Anybody ever try to still cram them in? [Congregation laughs]

A lot of people will say to themselves, *"Okay. We're going to go to the Johnson party for about 30 minutes. And then we're going to go to the framing store to pick up that gift. Then we'll go to the other party for another half hour. Then we'll pick up the honey-baked ham on the way home."* I mean, we try to stretch ourselves and cram ourselves so much. And the fact is: There's sometimes just not enough December to fill in all the things that we want to do.

Have you ever heard that some corporations actually are having their Christmas party in January? Anybody ever heard of that? I read an article; it said the six reasons why January is the new December [congregation laughs] in terms of holiday parties. And it listed things like: We beat the rush; or at least let the rush go by first. It's easier to find a venue. Well, I like this one! It said it helped start the new year with something else to look forward to. And they found that there's a little bit more meaning in it when it's got some space around it in January, versus when it's crammed and crowded as one of the many things to do. And they could also be a little bit more inclusive; that it isn't just Christmas. It can be more inclusive to all.

But there's no question that being busy at Christmas has become the norm. Being the rushing, hectic pace has become the norm. And while that has some good moments of being exhilarating and fun and exciting, it can also be exhausting. It can also be draining. It can also leave us at the end of Christmas thinking, *"Thank God!"* We're almost relieved that it's over, and sometimes wonder, *"What was that all about?"*

Socrates in 470 BCE said this. This is 400 years before Jesus was born! This was 2500 years from now. He said this. He said, ***"Beware of the barrenness of a busy life."***

Beware of the barrenness of a busy life. Being busy is fun, and we see being busy as great. And it definitely has a lot of great benefit. However, being so busy can sometimes cause harm and limit and deprive us of the levels of joy and happiness that we want to experience. Not just with Christmas and its deeper meaning, but in levels of love and intimacy and connection and friendship. Being so busy actually robs us from a sense of inner peace, an inner sense of fulfillment, and being as fully present and engaged to what it is that's really going on in our lives. Beware of the barrenness of a busy life!

A busy life -- an overly busy life -- does two things. One: we're off balance. We're out of balance. And when there isn't balance, there isn't peace. And the other one is that it sometimes leads to a sense of

emptiness, as I said, because we can't be fully engaged and fully open-hearted and present when we're always kind of rushing.

There's someone who sent a quote. It said, "*Being out of balance and being too busy has us losing touch with who we really are.*" Has us losing touch with our inner selves.

So my question for you is: Where in your life are you maybe a little too busy? Where in your life are you a little bit out of balance? And where in your life is your heart and your soul seeking a greater sense of inner peace?

Tonight my message is entitled, "The Presence of Peace." And to me, the thing about it is that peace is this incredible thing that is always present and available to us. In the Book of Philippians it calls it "*the peace that surpasses all human understanding.*" A peace that's not just because things are calm and easy in our lives; it is because we are so connected to that Source; to that Spirit of calmness and serenity that lies within each of us. There is a calmness and a stillness in each of us, but we don't always feel it, because we are so busy.

But Christmas is a reminder ... And one of the four advent candles is peace. Peace! Sometimes it's so busy, we don't think of Christmas and peace. But it is! Jesus was called the prince of peace. The angels said, "*Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth towards all men.*" We sing every service, "*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*"

When you look at the story of Christmas, it really points us to levels of peace in so many subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Like, do you remember Mary and Joseph; there wasn't any room in the inn. And so they had to go to a quiet stable in a quiet place, and that's where the Christ child was born. And I think it's powerfully symbolic that the Christ is not born in a mind and a life that's so crowded; it can only be born in one that has quietness and space and solitude.

And so what you get when you hear, like "Silent Night" and "O, Holy Night" and "*O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.*" So much of the message of Christmas really is about peace! Which is so far away from the way that we celebrate it in our busy and hectic world.

So how do we mesh these things together to feel a sense of peace in the culture of how we celebrate Christmas? And so tonight I want to talk about three things that can help us develop the presence of peace.

And the first one is **SILENCE**. I want you to think about silence for a second. What relationship do you have with silence? What is the role that silence plays in your life currently? Is it a big role? Is it a small role? Is it no role?

One of the things I would say about silence is that most people are uncomfortable with silence. Sometimes we think we need to fill it up with noise all the time. Anybody ever turn on the TV or the radio or do anything just to have some noise? Because silence is not quite as comfortable.

Something else about silence is: Sometimes silence can be awkward. You ever have an awkward moment in a conversation? Where there was silence and you just felt like you didn't know what to say? And we just feel awkward!

Another thing about silence is that it can be unsettling. You ever had silence happen and you think, "*Oh, man! Something must be wrong! The kids must be doing something mischievous or ...*" [Congregants laugh] I mean, we do that!

And silence can sometime be scary. Not "Silence of the Lambs" scary, but ... [Laughs with congregants] But what can be scary about silence is it forces us to think and feel. And not be able to avoid some of the

hurt that's inside of us. Some of the things that we're struggling with and having a difficult time. Sometimes silence is a scary and uncomfortable thing, and we don't want to go there.

Blaise Pascal said something amazing. He said, "***All of man's problems stem from a single thing: man's inability to just sit still.***"

You know, I read an article this week, and it was called, "Being Comfortable with Silence is a Superpower." [Congregants laugh] That developing a greater relationship with silence is a superpower! Because, as we are more connected and intimate with silence, it not only brings a sense of peace -- which is what we're talking about -- but it opens us to have a greater level of awareness. It opens us as a channel for greater creativity and inspiration. To see solutions and possibilities that we usually don't. Silence brings the human, busy thinking down and opens us up to the infinite intelligence and wisdom of God. Silence is a powerful and amazing thing, but we need to get there regularly to open ourselves to that.

Einstein and Thomas Edison -- two of the greatest thinkers -- believed in the power of silence in helping them come up with their theories, having greater solutions and exploring greater ideas.

So there was a king who commissioned two artists to develop paintings of peace. The first one did a beautiful, serene picture of a mountain lake. The mountains were gorgeous; the sky was gorgeous, and the water was so still that it was like a mirror and perfectly reflected the mountain scene. You looked at it and you thought, "*That is the perfect picture of peace.*"

The second artist did a raging waterfall with water thunderously coming down with white mist just coming up from how powerfully the water was hitting the rocks below. And then there was a little branch that was gnarled, just at the side ... like, literally, within inches of this little waterfall. And it had a little bird on it, and the little bird was singing its little song.

Which do you think depicted a greater idea of peace? When I first heard that story, I thought it was the bird: singing a peaceful song in the midst of challenge. Finding its own peace. And now I think it's both. Because it represents outer peace and inner peace.

And I think it behooves us all to look at the outer part of our lives and figure out, "*Where in my life can I find a little more quiet?*" Maybe turn off the TV a little more often. Or not play the music.

I know somebody who doesn't speak at all one day a week to have more silence. I think I told you, about four years ago, I attended a 10-day silent retreat. And I found that one of the easiest things to do was to not talk. It's hard to imagine, since I do what I do. [Congregants laugh] But finding some space in your life to reduce the amount of noise and find more quiet and silence is an important thing.

And then: Inner silence. It is to be still and know the presence of God. There is something amazing that happens in silence. I don't understand what it is, but something amazing happens. I always say, like, in the tomb with Jesus there was darkness and silence. But something miraculous happened! In the beginning with God, in the Creation story, there was emptiness. There was silence; no noise. But something happened. There was something amazing that happens in the silence. It is like the intelligence of the Universe gets to move and expand in a different way if you create that space for it.

If we want to feel a greater sense of peace, we have to have a greater relationship and experience and practice of that incredible gift of silence. Because it truly is a superpower that'll help us feel the presence of peace.

And the second for peace -- for practicing and feeling the presence of peace -- is **ACCEPTANCE**.

How many people ever had something happen in your life that you really didn't like, and you had a hard time accepting it? [Congregants laugh] Anybody ever have something like that? And it's a funny thing, because when things happen, we go to, like, "*I can't believe that happened! Why did that happen?*" We complain that it happened; we hate that it happened; we say it's wrong that it happened; it's unfair that it happened. "*I didn't deserve that to happen!*" And we spend a lot of energy just fighting against "what is." We fight against "what is." We fight against something we can't change.

Somebody said that fighting against "what is" is like trying to teach a cat how to bark. It just ain't gonna happen! [Congregants laugh] And one of the quickest ways to lose our sense of peace is by resisting, hating and not being able to accept what happens.

And I'll tell you: In *The Big Book*, page 417 in the edition that I have, it says, "*Acceptance is the answer to all of the problems I have today.*"

Sometimes we spend so much time fighting against it, and we just need to find a place of acceptance. But I'll tell you this: Acceptance is no easy practice for we human beings. Here's four reasons. The first one is: We like things to go our way all of the time. And when it doesn't, we pout and get pissed ... or whatever the right word is. [Congregants laugh] It could have come out of my mouth; got frustrated! But that's what happens! We have a hard time accepting because we think everything should go our way. And we get upset when it doesn't.

Second one is that we feel like accepting is "settling." Settling. Giving in. "If I don't want this thing, you want me to accept it?" [Congregants laugh] And so we struggle with that.

A third reason is: we think acceptance is passive and weak. And we live in a tough, active world. And it sounds passive and weak.

And then the fourth one is: It sounds like we're not really striving for success by accepting these things that aren't really enjoyable for us.

To me, accepting really comes down to this: it's about making peace with what has happened. And making peace in the sense that this is what has happened. I'm not going to fight about it; complain; and keep arguing or feeling sad or angry. I'm going to let that energy go -- to accept it as it is -- so I can find peace to maybe make some new decisions. See it from a different perspective. Realize that, "*Oh; maybe there's some gifts this thing might have to teach me and help me in my life.*" And not just putting the hand up of resistance and not acceptance. Because that immediately:

A) Robs us of peace; and

B) Limits our ability to use that energy in a more creative and positive way.

And so I think it's a powerful and important thing. So where in your life is it time for you to accept something that has happened that you're struggling with? And where in your life do you need to make peace with something?

"*Acceptance is the answer to all of our problems today*" is a powerful statement of truth.

And one of the levels of acceptance is -- not only what's happening in your life -- but I would say one of the hardest ones is self-acceptance. To accept ourselves as we are. We sometimes can be very tough on ourselves and not thinking we measure up in a number of ways. We can never feel true peace of mind until we find self-acceptance.

And if we're having trouble finding acceptance in our lives, we just have to notice two things: Where in our lives are we resisting? And where in our lives are we having some negative reaction or response? Those are two indicators that we might be having a little bit of a struggle accepting things.

The Serenity Prayer says it so beautifully: "God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." Practicing acceptance is the second key to experiencing the presence of peace.

And the final thing is to TRUST. Trust is an important thing for us to experience peace. To trust that our good will come to us, even if we can't see it in the moment. To trust that, even though I feel like I'm hitting a brick wall, that there is a solution; there is an answer; there is good that will come forth from this. That's an important thing.

Trust is an important part of the Christmas story. Mary was told by an angel she would, as a virgin, give birth to the Savior. She trusted that this thing she thought was beyond her capacity to do would come forth. She trusted and it came forth. The wise men trusted that following the star would lead to Jesus. They trusted and it did. The shepherds trusted the angels; that they would find the Christ child born. Trust is an important thing; a powerful thing if we want to experience peace.

Particularly when life isn't going well, trusting it'll work out -- even if we don't know -- is an important thing to give us a sense of peace, even in the midst of our challenge.

How many people have heard of Bob May? Anybody? Okay. One person. [Congregants laugh] No; that's good!

Bob May had a tough life. He was kind of beat up and bullied when he was a kid. He was small; he wasn't good at sports. And he just had a really tough time. He ended up going to college, doing well. He got married. And he and his wife had a baby. He worked at Montgomery Ward; this was in the Great Depression. And then, unfortunately, his wife got cancer and she died and left him and their four-year-old child alone. He was absolutely shocked and devastated and kept wondering, "*How is it I'm going to take care of my child? How is it that things are going to work out?*"

And he didn't have much ... He lost a lot of money with the costs of cancer, and couldn't afford very much. And all he was able to get was a two-room apartment for he and his daughter. And he really struggled with himself trying to figure out: How is this answer going to come?

And so he started making up these little stories, because Christmas was coming, and he couldn't buy her a gift. And so he developed these little stories of this little animal and how it was a misfit. And he would tell all of this extravagant, hilarious stories about it. And it entertained her. And then she absolutely loved this little book that he did for her.

And somehow Montgomery Ward got wind of it, and they paid him a little bit of money for the rights to the little book. And they gave away free a copy of the book in 1946 for all the kids who visited Santa. Six million books they gave away!

And then a big publishing company wanted to buy the rights to sell the book. And in an unprecedented move, the CEO of Montgomery Ward gave it back to Bob. And the book became a huge best-seller! Everybody knows: "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

The interesting thing is: He bounced back in a big way. Taking care of his daughter. A lot of success happening. He got married again. Coincidentally his brother-in-law was named Johnny Marks, and he wrote a song about the book -- "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" -- which was recorded in 1949 by Bing Crosby and Gene Autry. And it was the best-selling song that year, except for "White Christmas."

And his life turned around. And all the way through, he kept asking and seeking: "*How is this going to work out?*" He wanted it to work out.

And so I don't know what his trust level was the whole way. But I absolutely believe that it's important for us, in whatever area of your life feels like it isn't settled yet -- that it's unsure; you don't know what the outcome's going to be -- trust that God loves you. Trust that there's a solution. Trust that there are possibilities. Trust that things will work for your highest good.

There's a wonderful line in the Book of Judges 18, and here's what it says. And this was the Danites asking a young Levite priest. *"They said, 'Inquire of God that we may know whether the mission we are undertaking will succeed.' The priest said, 'Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord.'"*

And I would say to each of us: Go in peace. The mission that you are on is under the eye of the Lord. Your life is under the eye of the Lord. Your relationship is under the eye of the Lord. The work that you do is under the eye of the Lord.

Are you willing to trust? Put your trust like Mary had with the angel -- trust that you're going to give birth to something great? Trust that it's going to work out, even if you can't see it now. Can you hang on to your trust and keep centered in the peace of God as that process? Because it will unfold in a greater way than you can imagine at this moment.

I hope we have a fabulous and wonderful Christmas. And it's okay to be busy. But don't let your busy-ness lead to barrenness. And don't let busy-ness stop us from feeling the peace of God within ourselves.

That peace is a gift of Christmas ... but we've got to use the gift! And we've got to do it by taking time in silence: being still. Taking time to practice acceptance. And taking time to trust. Christmas is calling us to experience peace. But not just to experience it, but to be the presence of peace.

Are you willing this Christmas to be the presence of peace in your family? The presence of peace in your work? In your relationship? Wherever you go, whatever you do, let's all make a commitment to be the presence of peace.

God bless you all!

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