

# A Meditation on the Passing of the Peace

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## Advent 4 B

On with our exploration of the liturgy. The part I want to tackle today is the Passing of the Peace and it comes right after the Confession and Absolution. I'll stand before you and say, "The peace of the Lord be always with you." And you will then say –

Response: "And also with you."

And then we greet one another, using any appropriate words we wish, provided the greeting is in the Lord's name. (See BCP Rubric, bottom of p.360.)

The first thing to notice is that the Book of Common Prayer doesn't just say that we greet one another, but that we greet one another in the Lord's name. So the greeting, and this is the fundamental point I want to make, the greeting is not a private one. Like everything else in Liturgy which is vocalized or acted out, it is an action of the community, it is a shared reality.

And so in passing the peace, what is the shared reality we are acting out?

Well, it's the other face of confession. In the confession, we recognize that the community steps out of line, the community needs forgiveness – not just Jon Goman as an individual, but Jon Goman as embedded in the matrix of the church. The church itself is a fallen and sinful reality. Before the church can present itself to God we have to look at that and deal with that sin. And one of the characteristics of fallen and sinful realities is that they fracture. Healing fractures in the community is a part of fulfilling the purposes of confession and living out the fact of our absolution. The Passing of the Peace is the liturgical analogue to that universal aspect of the Christian life, that Christians are people who in themselves, and with others and with the natural world around them, bring reconciliation. They are to be fracture-healing people. Recognizing our own falling short and the falling short of the institutions of which we are a part means that healing itself must be expressed as a part of the liturgy if the liturgy is to be an adequate reflection of the Christian life. I mean, if we're perfect, then, of course, there is no need to try to heal fractures because if anyone is separated from us it's their fault and they, not we, need to do something about it. Well, there are folks like that.

So the Peace is the liturgical next step from the Confession. The Confession says OK, the institution needs to go about this process of being reconciled with itself and the world around it, because the institution and those in it have, by

their own actions, added to these fractures. To recognize the fractured nature of the church and not move toward its healing is to risk despair. To admit our sinfulness, but not express our hope of reconciliation with each other, is also to risk, in the long run, the building of despair about our human condition.

So it is possible, and I even recommend it, to think about the Passing of the Peace as an act of penance, because penance, properly understood and carried out, points toward the mending of brokenness. Now I know the word has all sorts of other associations in people's minds. Forget them. They're useless. Simply giving things up or doing things or feeling guilty, doesn't mend your relations with anything or anyone. It simply doesn't help life at all unless you enjoy deprivation, in which case you don't need to talk to me but I do have some referrals for you.

But the peace as an act growing out of our penance is that first step toward the process of actual reconciliation. This says something very important about it. I'll get at this by going around Gillhooley's barn, formerly known as Gillhooley's Tuledingle, but that's now too esoteric; what I mean is we will eventually get back to the subject. When the last revision of the Book of Common Prayer came out, I had the unpleasant responsibility of introducing it to three separate congregations. Those of you who remember the fuss, feathers and fru-fruery about the introduction of this last Book of Common Prayer will remember that the newly introduced Passing of the Peace was a flash point for conflict. So I became rapidly aware that around this simple action of greeting each other gathered all kinds of feelings, mythologies, theological dingbatteries.

Question: So there was no peace in the old Book of Common Prayer?

That's right. There has been no Passing of the Peace in Anglican services between the second prayer book of Cranmer in 1552 and its reintroduction during the current wave of liturgical revisions. In Cranmer's first Prayer Book it was the words which went with the Passing of the Peace which were preserved, not the actual involvement of the congregation in an exchange. The Passing of the Peace had been a standard element of all Christian liturgies, and when I say all I mean all, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Churches, the Mar Thoma Christians of India, the Syriac speaking Christians of Turkestan, the Abyssinian Church of Central Africa, they all had the passing of the peace. Except us.

In many of these services The Passing of the Peace is far more elaborately performed than with us. I was reviewing the Passing of the Peace in the twelve different Eucharistic prayers of the Syriac Orthodox Church yesterday, to get ready for this talk. So our three or four, our A,B,C,D, that's nothing. They have three times as many and don't squawk about it. Each one of those 12 Eucharistic prayers has a different verbal form for The Passing of the Peace. The different verbal forms explore all different aspects of what it means to share peace with each other. It's a very rich tradition. So the fact that the passing of the peace dropped out of Anglican and Western European Protestant services created somewhat of an anomaly. We were alone in this aspect of our worship.

When the Peace was reintroduced into the Episcopal Church you would have thought that the devil had proposed coming to lunch. There was a lot of conflict about it. Part of this conflict centered around a reluctance to touch other people

during the process of worship. Back in the dark ages Episcopalians thought of worship as a very private, personal experience, which it is. But they believed that as private and personal it was not also shared and communal. Seeing those as exclusive was the mistake. And they had largely abandoned that shared and communal piece. Remember that many Episcopal Churches used Morning Prayer as the main Sunday service, a service which requires far less communal action than the Eucharist. (No coming forward for communion.) When we worship God, we worship as a community. That's a point I want to strongly impress on everyone. Worship is a shared action. We can't do Eucharist alone. I can't celebrate a Eucharist by myself. If I don't have at least one of you here on a Sunday morning I read the service through the Prayers of the People, thus giving any late comers a chance to show up. And in this congregation we need to do that. But then, if no one shows by the time I get to the end of the Prayers of the People I'm done. I can't go any farther whether I want to or not, because there is no community. To be more correct, there is no living symbol of the wholeness of the Christian community here on whose behalf I can do the Eucharist action. So it's not that there's just a custom against having a Eucharist when there is no congregation, but it is absolutely illegal in the Episcopal Church. I could get into trouble with the bishop if I tried it.

All this is part of the recovery of the communal, shared nature of Christian worship. The Passing of the Peace, in which people have to actually address each other, is an important part of this recovery.

So the first problem I ran into in introducing the Passing of the Peace was this old presupposition of the personal and private nature of worship. Christians gathered on Sunday to worship with each other simply because it was a convenient way to do it, not because the gathered community was essential. We're trying hard in the Episcopal Church to recover a sense of the essential nature of shared worship.

The second reason The Passing of the Peace was difficult, and I believe this to be a more deeply-seated, a more psychological issue, is, well, what about those people with whom I'm not at peace? And there are times in my life when that's just about everyone. So can I pass the peace when I'm feeling pretty awful about someone?

Now, I think that's a very real and important question. It's not a trivial one. I'm not at all sure I can give a very satisfactory response. If you say to someone else, "The peace of the Lord be always with you," that seems to imply at least a bit of personal acceptance. So the question is real.

Now I'm going to surround the question with modifications and we'll see where we are when I'm done with modifying.

The first modification is that it's not just your personal peace you offer a person, but God's peace. So the question isn't so much whether you like them, as whether you can understand and accept the possibility of God hoping the best for them, of God loving them. If you can understand that, then it becomes a bit more legitimate to offer them the peace. You are not, after all, making a statement about your personal feelings, you're making an actual prayer to God on the other person's behalf. "The peace of the Lord be always with you"

implies “May God’s peace be with you.” May God open your life and your heart. May God accept your repentance and give you new life. And so on and so forth. Now on occasion I can even do this with a bit of glee in relation to a number of people I don’t like very much. All right, you son of a gun, I can’t do a thing with you but maybe God can take care of you. Now I don’t necessarily recommend that frame of mind during the Passing of the Peace, but the point I’m trying to make is clear. We’re doing something in The Passing of the Peace which is not just a private action, but something we’re doing on behalf of God. And I think that changes the texture of what we are about. If God can love them, how can I deny them God’s peace?

The second modification is that the peace, like most other things in our public worship, is a bit eschatological. OK, EFM people, a definition of eschatological, if you please.

Ans: Having to do with the end time.

Yeah. If it’s eschatological it has to do with the end time. Or, to be a bit more accurate and detach it from chronology, it has to do with purposes, with what things are for. The assumption in Christianity is that everything is for something. What the Christian life is about is trying to discover and live out what we’re for and to discover and help other people to live out what they are for. That’s what loving and being loved are about: helping people discover and live out what they are for. It doesn’t, except in a secular and low level sense, have to do with warmness about the liver or anything like that. It has to do with rational determination to seek the best for other people, and, by the way, for the whole world in which we live.

If that’s the case, to say, “The peace of the Lord be always with you” means that we are expressing a desire and a petition to God about that other person’s future. Remember that I said this prayer is connected to the confession? The confession is the acknowledgment that we and our institutions go wrong, that we are not moving toward our proper end, we are not properly eschatological. The Peace is a prayer that the other person move back into the proper line leading to their eschatological fate, to their end, to whatever the love of God has in mind for them. That they move back into that.

Consequently, when you pass the peace you can pass it to people whose current conditions are not all that desirable in your own eyes. If you find yourself capable of hoping for them, then you may pass the peace to them. But if, for some reason, you cannot hope for them, in other words, if the relationship is a malicious one, in which you don’t wish God’s peace for them, but wish their destruction, then the peace is truly inappropriate. To wish them the peace then makes you a liar. You’re not a liar if you don’t like them and desire God to heal them, but you are a liar if you pass them the peace and wish, at the same time, their destruction.

So, that’s just a couple of hints about how to think about the passing of the peace in what I hope is a bit more constructive way than an isolated personalism.

Now I do want to give you just one or two historical tid-bits to round this out. I mentioned, in response to a question, the universality of the peace in Christian liturgy. It’s also extremely early. It seems to be mentioned in the

New Testament itself, although we aren't sure of the liturgical context of the New Testament passages. The first time we can be sure a liturgical action is referred to, an action in public worship, is in Justin Martyr, who is somewhere in the early to mid second century. So he's early enough to make the Passing of the Peace really early. From then, it becomes a standard part of all Christian Eucharistic liturgies. Now the odd thing about The Passing of the Peace is that it comes in two places in the liturgy, depending on which family of liturgies you're dealing with. If your liturgy is a member of the Roman or Ambrosian families, (The Ambrosian Rite has its origin in Northern Italy, and the Roman Rite, these days, is just about everywhere.) then the Passing of the Peace comes immediately before you receive communion next to the fraction, the breaking of the bread. So, a very different location from ours. But if your liturgy is one of the Gallic, or the ancient Spanish liturgies, or Celtic liturgies, then The Passing of the Peace comes right where it is in our service. So it comes in two different places and its meaning changes slightly depending on which place it's in. In our liturgy, it's strongly connected with the confession and is an actual act of penance and reconciliation that builds on the confession. In the Roman position it defines membership in the Eucharistic community. So be aware that in different churches you find the peace in different places.

Now the interesting thing about this is that in the Episcopal Church I have the option of putting the peace in either place in the service. (See the Eucharistic rubrics on page 407, BCP)

Comment: How Anglican of them!

We've got these two options, so just make up your mind locally. But this is an important thing to realize: here is a central element in Eucharistic worship and we've got considerable freedom in what we do with it. That's typical of Anglicanism.

By the late Middle Ages, participation in Communion Services by both laity and clergy acting as an ordered whole had become quite rare, worship was much more a matter of watching the clergy do something on behalf of the laity than a shared process. The laity might receive communion once or twice a year, if that often. If you were a lay person who received four times a year you were seen as particularly devout. The interesting thing is that as the reception of the Eucharist by the laity declines, so does The Passing of the Peace among them. Early in the Middle Ages it was universal, as the Middle Ages go on and the laity become more passive, the Passing of the Peace becomes rarer and rarer. At the end of the Middle Ages, when the laity did pass the peace it was done by passing around a board with a picture of Jesus on it and everyone would kiss the picture on the board rather than greet each other. So, a bit less seeing the church as the community of believers gathered around and living through participation in Christ their head and a bit more of the "me and Jesus" side of things.

The Protestant reformers, for the most part, had lost any sense of what The Passing of the Peace was about, any sense of the necessity of knitting the community together into one and dealing with its divisions during the actual process of worship, so they just left it out. In the last 100 or so years liturgical scholars

in the western church became aware that we had lost something important and, largely due to their pressure, The Passing of the Peace is now returning to our services. Not only to our liturgy, but also into the Roman liturgy as an act of the laity, and into many Protestant liturgies, especially many Lutheran ones.

That's all I have to say about that. Please stand for the creed.