

**2nd Sunday of Easter—Divine Mercy Sunday—Year C
24 April 2022
“Peace be with you”**

Well, I’m very happy to be here today, celebrating Divine Mercy Sunday with all of you. Over the last few weeks, Christine and I have experienced that mercy over and over again as we navigated through my recent medical adventures. So, first, I’d just like to thank everybody for all the prayers and goodwill you’ve offered to us as I’ve been recovering. Your support and encouragement have meant the world to us. You know, as I rode in the ambulance to the ER, I repeatedly heard one of the EMTs say, “I can’t get a pulse; I can’t get a pulse.” At that point, I said an act of contrition, and then thought to myself, “I’m not afraid to die.” Despite that realization, however, I must admit that, right now, I’m very glad that I’m recuperating and resting here in the North Woods rather than resting in peace!

Speaking of peace, in today’s Gospel, Jesus greets his apostles with the words, “Peace be with you,” a greeting with great significance. Not only were they the Son of God’s first words to his friends after rising from the dead, but then he immediately repeated them, emphasizing their importance. So, what does that greeting truly mean? What is the Son of God’s peace?

That question is of particular interest to me because my last name, “McCaffery,” literally means “Son of God’s peace.” Because I’d like to be able to live up to my own name, and because of my recent brush with death, I’ve been pondering the peace of Christ over the last few weeks. So, today’s homily will be the first of two that I preach on

the topic. When I preach again next month, we'll continue our exploration of the meaning and significance of Christ's peace.

For now, to better understand what the peace of Christ is, let's first clear up what it is not. The Catechism teaches that "Earthly peace is the image and fruit of the peace of Christ" (CCC 22305). Much as we are made in the image of God, but are not God, so worldly peace is the image of Christ's peace, but is not, in and of itself, the peace of Christ. Indeed, at the Last Supper, Jesus said, "My peace is my gift to you. I do not give to you as the world gives peace." Thus, the peace of Christ is not the end of war and conflict, nor is it simply a life free of worldly anxiety and worry. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did confirm the importance of peace-makers by declaring that they will be called "sons of God." But he also insisted that he did not come to bring worldly peace but rather division, and he prophesied that devastating wars would usher in the Great Tribulation before his second coming at the end of time. So, tragically, war and conflict will be with us until the Lord returns. Thus, as great a good as worldly peace is, as noble and important as it is to strive for it, that is *not* the peace of Christ. In fact, we can experience the peace of Christ here and now even when everything is falling apart all around us.

So, what *is* the peace of Christ? We get a hint when we consider the Hebrew words Jesus probably used in his greeting, *shalom aleichem*—"Peace be upon you." That word for peace, *shalom*, can be used simply as a greeting, either "hello" or "goodbye," but it also has a deeper meaning—primarily *peace*, but including a sense of wholeness, well-being, and prosperity. If used with reverence and intentionality,

the greeting, *shalom*, reflects a desire that all may be “right” with the recipient of the greeting—“May it be well with you.”

Jesus was undoubtedly using it in this sense when he came into the upper room on Easter. His disciples were grieving and guilty, still reeling from the shame and shock of their master’s death on the cross. When Jesus appeared to them, his greeting of peace was certainly a word of comfort. Luke’s Gospel (Lk 24:36-43) makes clear that Jesus was seeking to allay their fears and uncertainty when he appeared and greeted them in peace. “Why are you troubled?...It is I!” he told them. In other words, he was saying, “Be at peace. I’m OK. I’m alive again!”

And yet, Jesus’ greeting means much more than that. There is another essential element of Christ’s peace. We find a clue to that deeper meaning in the Mass itself, particularly in the prayers which surround the Sign of Peace. There is an old Latin saying, *Lex orandi, Lex credendi* which, loosely translated means, “The way we worship reveals what we believe.” Indeed, the way we worship in the Communion Rite at Mass reveals what we believe about Christ’s peace. Through the lens of our sacred liturgy, we’ll see that prayers about peace are always tightly linked with the Lord’s divine *mercy*.

Our Communion Rite begins with the Lord’s Prayer, where we pray that we might be as forgiving—as merciful—as the Father is. Then, after the Our Father, we pray what is called the Doxology: “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.” Between those two prayers, however, there is a brief prayer called the Embolism, which in this context means, “something inserted”—a prayer inserted between the Our Father and the Doxology. When we conclude the Lord’s Prayer with the words, “Deliver us from evil,” our priest

affirms that petition with the Embolism: “Deliver us Lord from every evil, graciously grant us peace in our days, that by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress.” Note here the intimate association between peace and mercy: “grant us peace...by the help of your mercy.”

Following the Doxology, our priest introduces the Sign of Peace, saying, “Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church [in other words, “Be merciful!”] and graciously grant her peace...” Again, we see a direct connection, a correlation, between Christ’s mercy and Christ’s peace. At that point, Father shares the peace of Christ with us, but he does so in a unique way. I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed, but when Father David shares the sign of peace with us from the altar, his words are accompanied by a subtle hand gesture—he gestures first to the host, the Body of Christ, present on the altar, and then gestures toward the congregation. That gesture implies that Christ’s peace resides in and springs from his sacrificial and real presence among us—his body and blood, soul and divinity being offered upon the altar. In other words, the peace that Christ offers us—symbolized by Father’s gesture—arises directly from the mercy poured out by the Lord on the Cross as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

Finally, after we share Christ’s peace with one another, we pray the Lamb of God—the *Agnus Dei*—where once again we proclaim the essential connection between his mercy and his peace: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.” In other words,

through his mercy, we are granted his peace. Thus, the Sign of Peace at Mass is surrounded by prayers which highlight the intimate connection between Christ's divine mercy and his blessed peace.

So, what is the significance of that linkage in light of Jesus' greeting to his disciples on Easter night? Why is this reading about Christ's peace so appropriate on Divine Mercy Sunday? Because when Jesus offered them his peace that night, fundamentally, he was offering his mercy, his forgiveness. He was relieving them of their guilt, shame, and doubt, despite their recent betrayals. And just like on the Cross when he begged his Father to forgive his persecutors even though they weren't asking for it, Jesus offered his merciful peace on Easter night before his disciples even asked for forgiveness.

Indeed, there is no mention in Scripture that they *ever* asked for his forgiveness, which makes what he did next even more stunning. He immediately gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins in his name! From the font of great mercy from which he had just forgiven them, he endowed them with the authority to share the mercy of forgiveness, the *peace* of forgiveness, with all repentant sinners down through the centuries. In sharing with them the great peace that comes with forgiveness, he empowered them to share that peace with all of us.

The sheer generosity of this undeserved gift is overwhelming, and yet, the mystery of Christ's peace goes even deeper; it stretches even beyond the great act of forgiving our individual sins. Recall that, in part, Jesus' greeting meant, "Be at peace. I'm OK. I'm alive again." At the same time, however, he was also saying, "Be at peace. *You're* OK. *You're* alive again! Not only do I forgive your sins, but through my Cross and Resurrection, you and the entire human race have been

restored to life. I have conquered sin and death; I have destroyed the gates of hell and flung wide the gates of heaven. I have *rescued* all of you from the clutches of evil.” Think about that. Not only did the disciples rejoice at the Lord’s resurrection, as we do this Easter season. Not only did they experience the peace of his mercy and forgiveness, as we can in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When they received the Holy Spirit, they also were the first to experience the fruits of our Savior’s great rescue mission—the rescue of each and every human soul in all places and all times. Our rescuer gave his life so that we could be reconciled to his Father, and freed from the bondage of sin and death, forever. Jesus gave his life that we might share his life, and live it abundantly for all time.

Next month, we will explore the implications of the Lord’s great rescue mission—how it can change our lives and empower us to go out and joyfully spread the Gospel with others. We will also consider how a deeper understanding of Christ’s peace can deeply affect how we share the peace of Christ with one another here at Mass. Until then, however, consider the testimony of one who understood the life-changing nature of his undeserved rescue by Jesus Christ—a rescue which literally knocked this man to the ground, blinded by the brilliance of his merciful savior. I speak, of course, of St. Paul, so let me leave you with his proclamation to the Colossians about divine mercy and peace: “[God] rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. Through him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins...It pleased God, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making *peace* through the blood of his Cross” (Col 1:13-14, 19-20).