

Passing the Peace



A couple of weeks ago, prior to Holy Communion, I invited folk to pass the peace with one another. As this doesn't seem to have been a common practice in this congregation (at least since I've been here) I thought it might be appropriate to make a few comments about the practice that has made a resurgence in churches over the last few years. While there are a couple of places in the liturgy where it is appropriate to pass the peace, the UCA's liturgy book, *Uniting in Worship*, places it at the beginning of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper or as it is also known, Holy Communion or the Eucharist. It is also appropriate to use it after the words of Assurance following the prayer of Confession as it affirms the peace of Christ as it comes to us through our act of repentance.

The following quote is from Robert Gibbin's book, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*, (1990):

This simple action has a long history. For Paul, as for others of his and similar cultures today, a kiss is the usual form of greeting between men and men, and women and women. Yet the kiss between Christians had a special quality. It was precisely not the kiss of human affection, a greeting. It was an acceptance that one belonged to a new order, of those who had been made holy in Christ. A 'holy kiss' was a description reserved for the kiss of the baptized and therefore was placed at this point in the liturgy as the linchpin between the Service of the Word, which was open to anyone, and the Service of the Sacrament, which was open only to the baptized. This is the affirmation of those whom Christ has made one—whether we like each other or not! In Christ, a Jew kisses a Greek, a master a slave, a man a woman; it is a radical new order. Thus the Peace should not be used as a mere greeting, for 'getting to know you'.

It is essentially an action, a movement in our usually static liturgy. It may well be a kiss, but is more likely, in our society, to mean a firm handclasp. A decision on cultural grounds may well need to be made, depending on the customs of a community. But whatever manner of

expression is decided upon, it should reflect Christ's acceptance of us, rather than our enthusiastic feelings for particular people.

Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. (1 Thessalonians 5:26 RSV)

Greet one another with a holy kiss. (Romans 16:16 RSV)

Greet one another with the kiss of love. Please to all of you that are in Christ. (1 Peter 5:14 RSV)

Please I leave with you: my please I give to you: not as the world gives do I give to you. (John 14:27 RSV)

When we have ended the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss.

(Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 65.2[c.150 A.D.])¹

Paul Ryan² in his article, 'Passing the Peace', writes,

Today in many congregations we may pass the peace during a mutual greeting, after words of assurance, prior to celebrating the Lord's Supper, or at the conclusion of a worship service. At these times we leave the comfort of our seat, turn to our neighbors, grasp their hands, and speak the words, "The peace of the Lord be with you" and receive the words in turn, "And also with you."

The gesture is simple, but the meaning is profound. When we extend our hand to another, we identify with Jesus, who extended his life to the point of death to make peace with humanity (Col. 1:20-21). What's more, in the midst of divisions we symbolize our unity through handshakes and hugs (Eph. 2:14-21). Likewise, when we regularly pass the peace we practice God's call to make every effort to maintain the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).³

Many churches today have a time within the service for greeting one another. This, in itself, might be fine, but it does not reflect a true understanding of this part of the liturgy. It is not a "Hi, how are you going?" Rather it is an affirmation of Christ's peace—a peace that he offers to us through his sacrifice and resurrection.

The peace of the Lord be with you.

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¹ Robert Gribbin, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*, (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1990)

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³ Paul Ryan, <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2011/passing-peace>