

Gift of Peace

(Watch the You Tube Clip of a “Peace Package” www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNsjr-ukol.)

Image: (Pause the clip at the 55 second mark) You are looking at package 10,000 sent anonymously from Franck de Las Mercedes. According to *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 8, 2011) the artist is taking the idea of peace packages literally. He mails small boxes with abstract designs on the outside to anyone, anywhere in the world – for free. Pasted under the address is a label that reads: ***Fragile. Handle with Care. Contains Peace.***

Franck says that we expect something of value to come in a box, like a shirt or book—especially at Christmas! But his boxes are empty except a message that has no price, such as “peace,” “love” or “hope.”

Since 2006, the artist and his wife have mailed 10,000 boxes to people around the world, and all he asks is that recipients send him e-mails with photos of themselves and the boxes. Franck’s hope is that people who receive his boxes will devote some thought and conversation to intangibles such as peace, love and hope.

Indwelling: I want to talk a bit about God’s peace package today.

When God sends a peace package, the box is never empty. Listen to the first two verses of Psalm 85 – or better yet read them with me out of your bulletin:

Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people, you pardoned all their sin.

Psalm 85 tells us that God the Lord will “speak peace to his people,” and will call for them to respond by turning to him “in their hearts” (vs. 8); look at verse 8 with me and read:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turned to him with their hearts.

The psalmist goes on to say that God’s salvation is sent out into the land, and is received by “those who fear him.” This is God’s peace package. God is generous with peace and salvation, but God calls for a response. The only way we can benefit from this gift is to receive it by turning to God in our hearts and offering the respect God deserves. We are called to accept the package and open it. When we open it a precious collection of treasures spills out. Read verse 10 with me:

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet and righteousness and peace with kiss each other.

Faithfulness will spring from the ground, and righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps. God’s peace package contains more than meets the eye. Packed into this box is the entire character of God. Steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace. So, when we tear

open this package we find the gift of God's own self.

If you look at the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Mark there is one thing that holds all these lessons together prior to peace - and it is often overlooked: **Forgiveness**. John's popular appeal in the wilderness came from preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Isaiah proclaims:

"Comfort, O comfort my people!" Jerusalem has served her term, her penalty is paid!" God's people are restored to full relationship with God – You can almost hear Handel's famous Messiah. These peace packages include the gift of forgiveness. Our lessons this morning remind us of an age-old cycle. We break the rules, the boundaries and disobey God and instead of destruction, God *sends love and peace*. God's choice is to love instead of to destroy and God set the path to peace through forgiveness.

Immediacy: Sunday evening I watched the Hallmark premiere of Mitch Albom's "Have a Little Faith." It was an emotional tribute to both Rabbi Albert Lewis and Pastor Henry Covington.

One of the most moving parts of the film was Mitch Albom sitting in the car and listening to Anthony Castelow's story. Every time Mitch came by the I Am My Brother's Keeper church, "Cass" would say to him: Sometime you are going to have to hear my story." Finally, Mitch took the time to listen to his life story which is about repentance and being unconditionally forgiven. "Cass" was a junkie who stole ham sandwiches from the homeless shelter and despite that transgression was then invited to live in Pastor Henry Covington's home; sleeping on the couch for a year. Today he is a deacon of the church and a man who has found peace. But his story of forgiveness validated the gift of peace that Mitch observed in Pastor Henry; here was a man who lived his faith despite a horrible past life. This pastor was living the grace he experienced from God with others, including Cass the man who was stealing from his kitchen.

Imitation: *Within the movie, Rabbi Albert Lewis told this story: A man seeks employment on a farm. He hands his letter of recommendation to his new employer. It reads simply, 'He sleeps in a storm.' The owner is desperate for help, so he hires the man.*

Several weeks pass, and suddenly, in the middle of the night, a powerful storm rips through the valley. Awakened by the swirling rain and howling wind, the owner leaps out of bed. He calls for his new hired hand, but the man is sleeping soundly.

So the owner dashes off to the barn. He sees, to his amazement, that the animals are secure with plenty of feed.

He runs out to the field. He sees the bales of wheat have been bound and are wrapped in tarpaulins. He races to the silo. The doors are latched, and the grain is dry. And then the owner understands. 'He sleeps in a storm.'

My friends, if we tend to the things that are important in life, if we are right with those we love and behave in line with our faith, our lives will not be cursed with the aching throb of unfulfilled business. Our words will always be sincere, our embraces will be tight. We can sleep in a storm.

– Rabbi Albert Lewis

I wonder if doing the work of forgiveness helps us sleep in a storm. I truly believe that when God's peace package arrives it comes on the heels of a moment of forgiving grace. Maybe this week we learn what forgiveness can do for us and how it fosters a life of peace; where we sleep soundly. Jesus sends these packages in the most unassuming of places. It is not what we expect. God does not barrel into our lives with loud pronouncements. God's present of forgiveness is quiet and comes to the heartbroken. It comes not when we feel powerful and in charge of our lives, but when we feel the most out of control and lost. The Good News, the Gospel, the news of Good tidings about Jesus' coming is a party of huge proportions. It is the best news of all. We are forgiven and transformed. Jesus will die at our hands while offering us that precious gift. Jesus will remain consistent to the very end and will not return violence with violence. This week God sends us a peace package that is forgiveness. It is the greatest gift we can receive. Even the best of Christmas movies carry that message: *How the Grinch stole Christmas, a Christmas Carol, It's a Wonderful Life* – all tell a story where the end only happens when the characters are forgiven past deeds. Our culture calls it the *Christmas Spirit*, but those of us who have opened the peace package from God know it is much more than that. It is what our lives depend upon and that is the vast grace and forgiveness of our God! The best peace present you can receive in a lifetime. It may gift us with the ability to sleep through a storm!

In the End: Perhaps we could imitate God and send a few peace packages to others. At a time when Christmas packages are filled with everything but peace, you can reclaim some of God's missing treasures. Extend steadfast love to a teenager who is rebelling with every ounce of his energy. Practice faithfulness in your marriage, and make every effort to express appreciation to your spouse. Show righteousness in your schools or where you work, by being honest and fair in all your activities. Work for peace in your relationships, looking for ways to reduce tensions and increase harmony, instead of picking a fight or spreading gossip. If you invest as much in these packages of peace as in the other gifts, this will turn out to be the best Christmas ever! And you just may sleep a whole lot better...Amen. (Press remaining 25 seconds of clip)