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## **A Meta-Narrative of Consolation**

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Several years ago, I was at a symposium at which we were discussing the struggle that many young people have today with their faith. One of the participants, a young French Canadian Oblate, offered this perspective:

"I work with university students as a chaplain. They have a zest for life and an energy and color that I can only envy. But inside of all this zest and energy, I notice that they lack hope because they don't have a meta-narrative. They don't have a big story, a big vision, that can give them perspective beyond the ups and downs of their everyday lives. When their health, relationships, and lives are going well, they feel happy and full of hope; but the reverse is also true. When things aren't going well the bottom falls out of their world. They don't have anything to give them a vision beyond the present moment."

In essence, what he is describing might be called "the peace that this world can give us." In his farewell discourse, Jesus contrasts two kinds of peace: a peace that he leaves us and a peace that the world can give us. What is the difference?

The peace that the world can give to us is not a negative or a bad peace. It is real and it is good, but it is fragile and inadequate.

It is fragile because it can easily be taken away from us. Peace, as we experience it ordinarily in our lives, is generally predicated on feeling healthy, loved, and secure. But all of these are fragile. They can change radically with one visit to the doctor, with an unexpected dizzy spell, with sudden chest pains, with the loss of a job, with the rupture of a relationship, with the suicide of a loved one, or with multiple kinds of betrayal that can blindside us. We try mightily to take measures to guarantee health, security, and the trustworthiness of our relationships, but we live with a lot of anxiety, knowing these are always fragile. We live inside an anxious peace.

As well, the peace we experience in our ordinary lives never comes to us without a shadow. As Henri Nouwen puts it, there is a quality of sadness that pervades all the moments of our life so that even in our most happy moments there is something missing. In every satisfaction there is an awareness of limitation. In every success there is fear of jealousy. In every friendship there is distance. In every embrace there is loneliness. In this life there is not such a thing as a clear-cut, pure joy. Every bit of life is touched by a bit of death. The world can give us peace, except it never does this perfectly.

What Jesus offers is a peace that is not fragile, that is already beyond fear and anxiety, that does not depend upon feeling healthy, secure, and loved in this world. What is this peace?

At the last supper and as he was dying, Jesus offered us his gift of peace. And what is this? It is the absolute assurance that we are connected to the source of life in such a way that nothing, absolutely nothing, can ever sever - not bad health, not betrayal by someone, indeed, not even our own sin. We are unconditionally loved and held by the source of life itself and nothing can change that. Nothing can change God's unconditional love for us.

That's the meta-narrative we need in order to keep perspective during the ups and downs of our lives. We are like actors in a play. The ending of the story has already been written and it is a happy one. We know that we will triumph in the end, just as we know that we will have some rocky scenes before that ending. If we keep that in mind, we can more patiently bear the seeming death-dealing tragedies that befall us. We are being held unconditionally by the source of life itself, God.

If that is true, and it is, then we have an assurance of life, wholeness, and happiness beyond the loss of youth, the loss of health, the loss of reputation, the betrayal of friends, the suicide of a loved one, and even beyond our own sin and betrayals. In the end, as Julian of Norwich says, all will be well, and all will be well, and every manner of being will be well.

And we need this assurance. We live with constant anxiety because we sense that our health, security, and relationships are fragile, that our peace can easily disappear. We live too with regrets about our own sins and betrayals. And we live with more than a little uneasiness about broken relationships and loved ones broken by bitterness or suicide. Our peace is fragile and anxious.

We need to more deeply appropriate Jesus' farewell gift to us: I leave you a peace that no one can take from you: Know that you are loved and held unconditionally.

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