

Are there any Star Wars fans here? If I said, “May the force be with you,” how would you respond? Let’s try it: “May the force be with you.” <.....>

I thought so!

The characters in Star Wars say, “May the Force be with you” often. They use this phrase to wish someone courage and success in difficult situations. Some say that this phrase also means “good luck,” as in, “May the random alignment of chance somehow give you an advantage in this difficult thing you are about to undertake.”

As you may know, I don’t believe in calling on or crediting random alignments of chance because that’s not how God sustains the universe. Miracles happen that defy the odds and the usual order of things, and miracles are not random.

Polls show that in 1977, when Star Wars was first released, roughly 90% of Americans would have agreed that God is at work in our world. In fact, George Lucas gave “May the Force be with you” a deeper, spiritual meaning beyond “good luck.” What it expressed was a belief that we humans could draw on and be aided by a mystical energy field (the “Force”) at work in the universe. “May the Force be with you” asks and affirms that the powerful, unifying energy of the universe would guide and empower them.

I digress a bit to say that 35 years later, in 2012 when the Hunger Games movies were first released, the blessing given to the heroes of THIS saga was, “May the odds be ever in your favor.” This was a sardonic good luck wish for people who knew that the odds were deliberately stacked against them in a deadly competition for a scarce food supply. The “blessing” for people in extremis had gone from encouraging people to connect to the Force to hoping that they would figure positively in the plans of whichever political entity was rigging things out of the public eye.

If you are wondering what any of this has to do with one or more of today’s lessons, look no further than our epistle lesson, the start of Paul’s first letter to the church he had founded in the Greek city of Corinth.

Corinth was located at the crossroads of key overland **and** sea routes, so the city was very cosmopolitan, very multi-cultural, and very tolerant of immorality, especially incest. The people in Corinth were either very wealthy or very poor. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown says that the people in the Church in Corinth were from the lower and middle strata of society: ex-slaves and artisans. Divisions and factions abounded inside the church.

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So, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to tell them they needed to amend their ways. Did you notice how he started out? Paul identified the church as “the church of God that is in Corinth,” and he identified the church’s members as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus.” Ooh; Paul is pointing them to the high road from the very start of his letter, pointing them to Christ Jesus, who he named nine times in these eight verses.

Next, Paul connected THIS congregation in Corinth with all other Christians, “with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Having focused the Corinthians on their identity in Christ, Paul then named their major gifts: “speech and knowledge of every kind.”

In Bible study this week, I speculated that the gifts of speech and knowledge were gifts of the heart versus the head, as in the passionate speech of opinions versus head knowledge of facts. (And this was long before the Internet had even been invented.)

Paul then reminded the Corinthians that their congregation contained **all** the spiritual gifts. Named elsewhere in Paul’s letter, the spiritual gifts are faith, healing, prophecy, proclamation, teaching, administration, reconciliation, compassion, and self-sacrificing service and charity for the help and encouragement of people.

We don’t know in today’s lesson how the congregation in Corinth responded to Paul’s instruction. However, we know from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians that they were initially defiant, even proud of their divisions, prompting Paul to make what he called a “painful visit.” Eventually, there was widespread grief and repentance, despite some continuing dissension.

I focused on this lesson today because, facing this task of bringing reconciliation to the Corinthian congregation, Paul greeted them this way, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And, being an Episcopalian, my immediate response was, “And also with you.”

This made me wonder what Paul was giving the Corinthians in this blessing. Grace is giving undeserved forgiveness, offering love and understanding instead of censure. Peace is more than just a temporary truce. This peace being offered is a deep, lasting well-being filled with completeness, wholeness, health, freedom from violence, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, and the absence of agitation or discord. These are not things that we humans can give, at least on a permanent basis, which is why Paul named “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” as the source of the grace and peace offered in his blessing.

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Christians have been wishing each other peace since the beginning of the Christian movement. We borrowed this practice from the Jewish community, who had been wishing each other “shalom,” which means “peace be with you,” for centuries before there were Christians.

To this day, during our liturgy each week we offer each other a part of Paul’s blessing to the Corinthians when we say, “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” The response is, “And also with you.” And then we turn and share this blessing with others, modeling what we are to do with all blessings we receive.

But that’s not all; this blessing of peace is a messianic blessing; it is all the things that Jews believe the Messiah will bring, and it is all the same things that Christians say describe the Kingdom of God, which broke into our world with the birth of Christ Jesus. In the Kingdom of God, there is no violence; all are well and safe. As Christians, we believe that these things are not just waiting for us in heaven but are the way God wants the world to be right now.

When we wish each other peace during our worship services we are wishing each other a life in the world as it should be, and we are committing ourselves to do what we can do in our own lives to spread God’s shalom. This is no easy task.

The Church in Corinth and this Church seem to have a lot in common. We are gifted among our members with every spiritual gift AND our lives are grounded in our identity in Christ Jesus. How will you, the People of Resurrection, continue to use these gifts to work together to share the Peace of God and the Kingdom of God with those who are our neighbors in our City’s West End?

However you choose to do so, our epistle lesson today reminds us that Christ Jesus “will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the meantime, “The Peace of the Lord be always with you.”

<... And also with you.>