

- The epistle reading for this morning is from the book of Romans, the fifth chapter where Saint Paul writes, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ "through whom we have obtained access "to this grace in which we stand "and we boast in our hope "of sharing the glory of God. "And not only that "but we also boast in our sufferings, "knowing that suffering produces endurance "and endurance produces character "and character produces hope "and hope does not disappoint us "because God's love has been poured "into our hearts through the Holy Spirit "that has been given to us. "For while we were still weak, "at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. "Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteousness person, "though for perhaps a good person, "someone might actually dare to die. "But God proves his love for us "in that while we were still sinners, "Christ died for us." The word of the Lord. (congregation mumbling) Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Heavenly father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen. (singing in foreign language) I begin with a hymn this morning that I can see most of you have not heard before. I can see some of you are sitting out there trying to figure out what language it is. It's not Spanish, it's not French, it sounds a little bit like German but you can't pick out any of the words. The hymn is Hungarian. In fact, it is the Hungarian National Hymn. For those of you who speak Hungarian, you can readily see the connection between the hymn and the lesson from Paul. For the six or seven of you that don't, I'll be glad to explain the connection. The melody, as you can tell, is stately and poignant. The text is poignant as well. The text is a prayer for peace by a people that have suffered long throughout history many kinds of persecution. During the Counter Reformation, for example, Hungarians were terrorized by the Catholic Church and over the centuries, they have been brutalized through countless wars. So their prayer in this hymn is that God will grant them a time of peace for they have suffered so much in the past that their pain is sufficient even for the future. But peace, as Hungarians know, is hard to come by. 100 years ago, on the eve of the 20th century, diplomats from all the leading governments of the world gathered together in The Hague for what was called the first International Peace Conference. It was held not to conclude a war or to settle any disputes but to focus on building a world of lasting peace. It dealt with issues of disarmament, international law, dispute settlement. A second conference was held in 1907 and a third one was scheduled for 1915. It was canceled. World War I came along and somehow it got in the way of talking about world peace. The century that followed has been the bloodiest century in human history. Over 93 million people have died in that 100-year period. Over 93 million people died in wars that raged around the world. A small percentage of them, only 5,000 or so lost their lives exactly 55 years ago this week trying to fight their way onto a miserable four-mile stretch of sand known as Omaha Beach. Three weeks ago, the world finally got around to holding that third International Peace Conference at The Hague. Over 10,000 people from the around the world gathered together to discuss for one week guess what? Disarmament, international law, the settlement of disputes. The hope once again is that the coming century, the golden 21st century that we all look forward to might finally be an era of world peace. If you live in Kosovo, you might be of the opinion that we are off to a pretty lousy start. If we have learned anything at all about peace since that peace conference, it is this, peace is hard to come by. Peace is not a pipe dream, it is something that can exist. Saint Paul talks about it in today's lesson as if it something that is real and attainable. Why then is it so hard to come by? It is, if we dare to paraphrase

Paul, the lack of peace that passes all understanding. The funny thing is that Slobodan Milosevic has always wanted peace. He's wanted it all along. He's just wanted it on his terms. They were terms that the rest of the world could not accept. No one wants war really, everybody wants peace. We just want it on our terms. Hammering out our terms of peace often takes the tools of war and so this morning, armed peacekeepers are marching into Kosovo. Whether we wage war or we wage peace, the result is the same. People are displaced, people hunger, peace suffer, people die and at best, only tentative solutions are won. Just 12 miles from the pews in which you are sitting this morning is a place called Bennett Farm. It is the site of a great Civil War surrender. You'll have to excuse me being a Yankee by birth, I still haven't gotten used to calling it the War of Northern Aggression. Out there at Bennett Place, so close to here, Confederate General Joseph surrender the bulk of the Confederate army to the Union General, William Sherman. It was a surrender completely on Union terms. Peace on our terms, that's what all people want but we forget what that means. Mark Twain wrote a story called "The War Prayer" that reminds us what it means. He tells of a church that was gathered one Sunday morning on the occasion of sending the town's boys off to fight in the war. A long prayer was offered for the aid and comfort of the soldiers for their courage in battle, for their defeat of the foe. It was a moving, passionate, eloquent device that was able to unite the assembly in its desire for peace, peace, of course, on their terms. At the conclusion of the prayer, an aged character walked down the aisle and stepped forward to deliver an unexpected message. "I come," he said, "from the throne bearing a message from God Almighty." And then he began to translate the prayer that had been spoken into the unspoken words that revealed the prayer's true meaning. "Oh Lord, our God, "help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds "with our shells. "Help us to cover their smiling fields "with the pale forms of their patriot dead. "Help us to drown the thunder of the guns "with the shrieks of their wounded writhing in pain. "Help us to lay waste their humble homes "with hurricanes of fire. "Help us to ring the hearts "of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief. "Help us to turn them out roofless "with their little children "to wander unfriended the wastes "of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst. On and on he went telling people of the true meaning of their prayer. Twain concludes the story with this wry comment. "It was believed afterward "that the man was a lunatic "because there was no sense in what he said." Peace on our terms, that's what everybody wants. And lest we feel too shameful about it, remember that such was the peace of biblical days. In an alternative reading for the day, the 19th chapter of Exodus has God speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai. And God says, "Tell the Israelites, you have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings "and brought you out myself." What God forgot to mention was that while the Israelites were being born to freedom on the wings of eagles, the Egyptians were being drowned in the sea. Well, that's one kind of biblical peace, total annihilation of the enemy. It is no surprise then that people were impatient with Jesus. He had charisma, he knew how to speak, he knew how to hold an audience and sway a crowd, put a sword in his hand and you would have a real leader. People would follow him anywhere but he did not take up the sword. He took up a cross and for those who wanted peace on their terms, Jesus was a stunning disappointment. The human way of peace, it always involves tremendous cost but it is the only way we know. "The habit of war is hard to break," one writer said and even Desmond Tutu, during the dark days of Apartheid said, "Why not war? "Indeed, we have no choice." But maybe there is a choice. Perhaps there is a choice but it comes not on our terms. It comes on God's terms and it begins not with international conferences held once or twice every 100 years, it begins with individual faith, it begins with the faith that people have in Jesus who took up a cross instead of a sword. It begins with Christ whose only weapon was his word and whose battle was with evil itself. For those who haven't heard, Christ won that battle. We have

faith not in an insurrection, but in a resurrection. "Therefore," says Paul, "since we are justified by faith, "we have peace, "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Not a peace that comes through diplomacy, not a peace that comes by committee, not a peace that comes and goes, not a peace that simply gives evil men and evil women time to plot another war but a peace that brings us into a free and certain connection with the God who made us, not a secular, tentative kind of peace, but a spiritual peace that flows from faith and works its way into the world by the faithfulness of that contrary cross-bearing, sword-shattering people that bear his name. What is this peace that comes on God's terms? Paul can't seem to tell us enough about it. "It is a path comes from grace," he says. You stand in a summer shower out under the bursting heavens, you are soaked to the skin, bathed with fragrant rain, chilled by its coolness, refreshed and cleansed in its flow. It requires no plunging or diving to get at its wetness. It simply rains upon you, a baptismal bath. That is the nature of this peace. As hard to achieve as it is to get wet "for you are justified by faith," Paul says, "and not by the works of your hands," not by fretting and striving after peace, not by meeting in committees and councils and conferences and camps, not by decimating your enemy and dictating your terms. You get this peace simply by standing in the rainfall of grace. What is this peace that comes on God's terms? "It is a peace that is worthy of boasting about," Paul says, "for the goodness of God belongs "to those who believe "and so we boast and we brag and we rejoice "in the hope that the glories of God are part "of this shower of grace. "There is simply nothing else to boast about," Paul says except that God has won the battle. There are, to be sure, still skirmishes around the world, some of them rather large, some of them perhaps even right in your very homes but they are like those island-bound fighters in World War II who continue to fight for months and for years after the war ended because they had not been told it was over. But Paul tells us the battle has been won with the cross, not with a sword and that, my friends is a peace to rejoice in. I once had a professor from the plains of North Dakota, a theology professor and he's a simple man who never lost his folksy charm. Part of his charm was that even though he lived most of his adult life in the city, he still speaks with a rich northern farm accent. His words are thick and rough, they tumble out of his mouth like hay bales falling off a truck. It's far from the genteel Southern tones that you usually hear spoken from this pulpit. He doesn't speak with finesse but he does have a knack for helping ordinary people understand the Gospel and he once told us that if you're going to preach the Gospel, you have to preach it in such a way that it's gonna make it sound so good that people say, "Oh, I need that. "Gimme some of that, gimme some of that "and then give me some more." Paul's right. If you make it sound that good, people are going to rejoice. What is this peace that comes on God's terms? It is a peace that enables us even to boast of our troubles for we know that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. Here perhaps is the greatest mystery for those who do not stand in grace. Luther had it right when he observed that it's the very opposite that seems to be true. Suffering produces impatience and impatience rejection and rejection despair and despair eternal confusion but it doesn't have to be that way. What would it be like to be at peace even in the face of your troubles? Like many of you, I have a close friend that died from cancer. There was no reason in her later years not to be bitter. She lived too little and died too young. I would visit her but even as a pastor, I had few words to say that could cut through the morphine and bring her any comfort. I would remember how lively and robust she had been, even as I watched her dwindle day by day. Yet somehow, the closer she came to death, the more she was able to understand the word of Saint Paul for suffering produced an endurance that enabled her to live with tremendous pain and endurance produced a character that shined forth with the light of Christ and character produced hope, hope to the extent that one day she was able to tell me this. You know, pastor, if I could go back to full health today, but

had also to take back my former level of faith, I think I would refuse it. It's not that faith is any less precious but it counts as very little when I see how close I have come to Jesus. How can you be in anguish and still brag on your troubles? You can only do it if you know the peace that comes on God's terms. Six weeks ago, my daughter's fourth grade school teacher was driving home from work when an oncoming driver crossed the lane and hit her head on. Her husband, a man of prayer, took up the vigil at her bedside at the intensive care unit over here at Duke Hospital. For weeks, the young woman lay in a coma, lingering somewhere between life and death. One day when he was allowed, the young husband went in to visit the man whose carelessness had nearly killed his wife. Deep in grief and uncertain all together that she would live, the young men forgave the driver for what he did. Before he could leave, a man in the next bed asked if he could speak to him. He had watched the interchange between the bereaved husband and the sorrowful driver. He had seen the pain on the young man's face and watched as the hand of grief reached out to touch the hand of remorse. He could imagine the taste of the tears that ran down each man's face. He had seen the young man's lips quiver and utter the unspeakable, gentle words that came from some vast hidden library of love. For what you did to my wife, I forgive you. Seeing all of this, the man asked if he could speak to the young husband about God. If the power of God could break through such pain and bring forgiveness in the face of grief, then that was a God he wanted to know. What is this peace that comes on God's terms? It is a peace that comes through the love of Jesus. It is the shalom of those whose shattered lives are held together by his life. It is a peace that sets aside anger, resentment, self-righteousness, even justice, all for the sake of forgiveness and love. What kind of peace is it that comes on God's terms? It's the kind of peace that makes an unbeliever in a hospital bed cry out, "There it is. "That's what I want. "That's what I've been looking for. "Gimme some of that." It's the kind of peace that makes a woman dying of cancer say, "That's what I need. "Gimme some of that. "You can keep good health, just gimme some more of that." It's a kind of peace that makes the world cry out, "Gimme some of that. "Gimme me some of that Jesus. "We've tried it on our own. "Now gimme some of that." My friends, if you want to work for world peace, wage a peace that is rooted in him. Amen.