

11/29/20

Funeral, Birgit Johannson

John 20: 19-23

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.

And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

These are Your Words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us through the truth, we pray. Your word is truth. Amen.

To all of you, friends and loved ones of Birgit Johannson, and especially to you, Ron, her son, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Amid the joys of the Advent season which begins today, our spirits are somewhat tempered, because this is a memorial service for Birgit Johannson, our beloved sister-in-the-faith who has stepped ahead of us in our journey heaven-ward. The ache in your hearts, the loss we all feel—these are natural enough and real enough, because in this life she will no longer be with us, and until we ourselves get to heaven we will not have the opportunity to speak with her, laugh with her, worship with her. And that is precisely why it is so precious for us to contemplate our Savior’s words in our text. Also to us who are gathered here today, Jesus says, “Peace be with you!” And He means His kind of peace—real peace between us and our Creator, real peace in our hearts that comes from our confident faith in Him who has paid for our sins and smashed the chains of death for us, real peace that soothes all the bitterness which we encounter in this world, real peace for us also at times of loss like this because we know with absolute certainty that we will see Birgit again.

I

Our Lord spoke these words to His disciples on the evening of that first Easter day. They had gathered together behind locked doors because they were afraid that the enemies of Jesus also wanted to harm them, arrest

them, kill them—just as they had done to the disciples’ beloved Teacher and Friend. The women who had visited His tomb that morning had told them that they had seen the Lord, but that still seemed so unbelievable now, and their hearts were still filled with feelings of loss and grief and those same nagging fears. But then Jesus came through the closed doors and presented Himself to them. “Peace be with you!” He said to them. And then, John tells us, our risen Lord held out to them His hands—still showing the holes from the nails which had held Him to the cross. And He showed them also His side, still showing the wound from the spear which the Roman soldier had thrust into His side to ensure that He was dead. These were, to be sure, marks of His sufferings—marks of the pain and the death He had endured for our sakes. But they were even more. They were the irrefutable proof that it was Jesus Himself who stood before them. They were the proof beyond all dispute of His bodily resurrection from the tomb. And that was why He could say to them, “Peace be with you!” That wondrous peace for our hearts that He spoke to His disciples and which He speaks to us today is built on this rock-solid foundation, that our Savior—Christ Jesus who was crucified for our sins—has indeed risen in triumph. He really has broken the grip of death which held us. He really has smashed the power of the grave. His Easter-morning victory—that is the peace which He offers us today.

II

Birgit Johansson lived with that peace in her heart, and we take comfort today in all the ways that she gave evidence that by faith she knew Christ Jesus as her Lord and her Redeemer, her Good Shepherd, her Savior, the Prince of Peace who put His peace into her heart.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says to His disciples and to us. Birgit lived this text every Sunday when she came to Old Zion—this church that she loved so much. In faith, she confessed her need for the Virgin’s Son as her Savior, and she listened with joy to His peace-imparting word of Absolution which wipes away all our sins in the blood He shed for us on Calvary’s hill. With faith in her heart, she listened with rapt attention to the Gospel-story in the readings and in the creed and in the hymns and liturgical songs which meant so much to her. She treasured that word about the Son of God who became her Brother-in-the-flesh in order to take her place both in His life under the Law of God and then again in His death on the cross of execution, and who rose in triumph in order to share His victory with her. And she came at every opportunity to receive the sacramental meal of Jesus’ body and blood to seal to her and to confirm to her the forgiveness and life which had been poured out upon her in her baptism. “Peace be with you,”

Jesus said to Birgit Johannson, and through her strong trust in the incarnate Son of God as her Savior, she received that peace already in this life.

Now she enjoys that perfect peace in His presence. In the second reading for All Saints Sunday, St. John describes those countless holy ones of Christ who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Now Birgit Johannson stands among that blessed throng, worships along with those other believers the Son of God seated on His throne, and sings along with them and with all the angels those heavenly hymns which proclaim His perfect love.

There is a special reason today why we need to take to heart that peace which our Savior offers also to us. Birgit’s death came so unexpectedly to us. We saw her—spoke with her, laughed with her, prayed with her—at the October meeting of our *Frauenverein*-Service Guild, and it was just a few days later that her son called the church to inform me that she had died that morning from a stroke. “You know neither the day nor the hour,” Jesus has told us. And if it is true that we take comfort from—and find joy today in—remembering her faith and in knowing that she now sees face-to-face the blessed One whom we must still know by faith, yet it is also true that her sudden death provides to each of us some food for sober reflection. Birgit herself would be the first to tell us if she could that each of us must now treasure that peace of Christ as she did, regularly hear His word with joyful faith as she did, receive His sacramental assurance at every opportunity as she did. Everything we do here is merely preparation for that day and that hour when our Savior calls us, and we want to be ready for Him as Birgit Johannson was ready.

We will miss her. Her regular attendance at worship was an example for all of us. She came faithfully to all the meetings of our *Frauenverein*-Service Guild, and she contributed to them with her gifts and with her strongly-held opinions which always seemed to have such a practical orientation. With her smile and her laughter and that distinctive Swedish lilt to her speech, she added so much to our congregational activities and to our fellowship meals.

“Peace be with you,” Christ Jesus says to us also today as we remember our departed friend and fellow-believer, and He leaves to us this vital task—to remind each other of that peace which passes all understanding, to comfort each other with that joyful Gospel which means the end to all our sorrows, to encourage each other to make use of our time in His service, as did Birgit Johannson. There is no better way that we can honor her memory.

May the Holy Spirit grant that to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.