

Preaching Peace

Ephesians 2:11-22

Whitefish UMC

July 19, 2009

- † Some words are downright offensive, aren't they? You can think of a few, as can I. Please don't say them out loud right now. Some words are coarse, racist, mean, and dirty.
- † But since when did "peace" become one of those words? Haven't you noticed that "peace" is spelled with five letters, not four? Nevertheless, a friend from our valley recently reported that a family was leaving their church because the father got physically sick to his stomach when the preacher mentioned the word "peace."
- † How can this be? How has a word—no, more than a word—a fundamental aspect of Jesus himself—become a curse? And what's to be done about it?
- † The Apostle Paul writes in today's letter to the Ephesians: "Christ is our peace, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility, making two different people (Jew and Greek) one....Christ came to preach peace and to teach peace."
- † The word for peace in Hebrew is shalom. In Israel today, when people meet each other, they don't say "Hey, what's up, how are you doing?" Instead they say, "shalom." It's used for good-bye and for hello—easy to remember.
- † The word shalom is not only important in contemporary Jewish vocabulary but also in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus not only greeted those encountered with "shalom," but he lived it, practiced it,

- preached it. His vision of shalom grew from the prophetic vision of Isaiah, where the wolf would lie down with the lamb and all people would live in God's abundant blessing.
- † Jesus knew that the root word behind the word shalom was “shelem.” And shelem means total, all encompassing well-being. It evokes harmony with God, self, neighbor, and creation.
 - † Jesus preached peace, and ultimately got himself killed for it. After his death, Paul, a most unlikely preacher of peace, took up Jesus' mantle. How ironic that Paul began his journey at the opposite end of the theological spectrum. For Paul was an expert at religious exclusivism and triumphalism. He was a Pharisee—an expert on the law and zealous in making sure everyone kept to its most minute detail.
 - † Paul was so fanatical that he attacked and hounded the followers of Jesus at first. In fact he was on his way to Damascus to find Christians and have them jailed when he was knocked off his horse and blinded and turned around by God—truly a remarkable conversion!
 - † And then Paul began his theological journey from narrow exclusivism to a broad, open, grace filled theology of the cross, which finally concluded that God's purpose in Jesus Christ is as big as the world itself. God sent Jesus, not to save a few fortunate ones who happened to be lucky enough to hear the news and believe it, but to heal and restore and redeem the whole creation.
 - † So Paul began as someone convinced of the exclusive truth of his own identity and tradition—full of rules and rituals to protect him from others—and by the time of his death, he said things like: “In Christ

Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...He is our peace...he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

- † But why did Paul have to tell the people of Ephesus to remember to teach peace and to live it? Because they were fighting, fighting, fighting. About what? About issues that seem strange to us now—like circumcision, what kind of meat to eat, leadership (well, that doesn’t seem so strange, does it?). They fought about speaking in tongues, holding to a specific dogma or not.
- † Fighting, fighting, fighting—they were. And we still are. Can we hear Paul’s words because they are meant for us?
- † There’s a medieval legend that gives us a jumping off place. Two knights in full battle regalia were riding along towards one another late one evening and neither thought there was anyone else around for miles. But by a strange turn of fate, they happened to intersect at a particularly dark place in the wood.
- † Both of them were startled and each one interpreted the motions of the other as gestures of hostility. Both of them perceived that they were in the presence of an adversary. So they began to defend themselves and to fight.
- † At first the blows were only slight, but as you know fighting has a way of escalating, and so soon the blows were bloody and deadly. Both of them were severely wounded but finally one of them was able to thrust his spear through the heart of his adversary.
- † And then badly wounded himself, he got off his horse in the darkness, and went over to the vanquished foe and pulled back the hood gear that was over the knight’s face. And there in the pale moonlight, he

- saw to his utter horror the countenance of his own blood brother. To think kinsmen had misperceived each other as enemies and as a result both of them had been destroyed.
- † “I don’t think I am stretching the truth to say that Jesus came into our world for one purpose, and that was to reverse the story of the two knights.” So says Dr. John Claypool, who started out as a Southern Baptist preacher and ended up a retired Episcopalian theologian in New Orleans.
 - † “Instead of kinspersons misperceiving each other as enemies and, therefore, destroying one another, Jesus came to help us see that even the enemy, if you can look deep enough, is in fact a kinsperson. And because of that primal connection down at the very base of our being there are reasons to be brotherly and sisterly with each other.”
 - † But how do we do this? It’s even hard in our own blood-related families, for heaven’s sake!
 - † We use the three sets of eyes that we have. That’s right—three sets—the eyes of the body, the mind, and the heart. The problem is that most of us only see with the first two sets of eyes.
 - † G. K. Chesterton wrote a wonderful biography of Saint Francis of Assisi. I read it twenty years ago when I got to go to Assisi with my mother and sister. Chesterton tells the story of Francis—a rash young man who dreamed of becoming a great knight but who instead fell ill and returned home a failure.
 - † Depressed, he retreated to a cave down in the depths of the earth. He was so depressed that he reached down and back to the place from which creation comes. He got to the place where he saw everything as it emanates from the creative and generous hand of God.

- Chesterton says that after that profound sense of all coming from the same source, he came out of that cave an absolutely transformed person. Conceptually, he came out walking on his hands.
- † Sound strange? If you walk around on your feet and you look at a tree, that tree has a sense of solidity as if it is self-sufficient in its own right. But if you begin to walk on your hands, turning upside down to look at the same tree, it is as if it is suspended in space, held in being by something other than itself.
 - † In this vision of things, St. Francis saw all creation as literally hanging like a chandelier. And what held it all in place was the desire of God that each entity or person simply be. So as a result of seeing everything in God and God in everything, his whole perspective changed. No longer could he see even an enemy as “other.”
 - † Lydia Talbot asked the preacher John Claypool a good question when he shared the story of Francis with her. “What about people who are in the depths of depression or isolation or feeling separated or just trying to survive. How can they hear the message?”
 - † Claypool replied, “Well, I think to ask their Creator to make them aware of all the ways of seeing that are available to us. We all have the capacity to see with our physical eyes, our mental capacity. We all have a mystical dimension to us. If we will simply ask ourselves, ‘How did I come to be? How did you ever come to be?’
 - † Our English word for ‘exist’ means ‘to stand out of nothingness,’ and the English word ‘depend’ means ‘to hang.’ I try very hard to look at every person as a chandelier. Everybody is hanging. Why? Because they exist because God wants them to.

- † And if I can get in touch with that divine origin, our divine dimension, then behavior becomes secondary to identity and what a person does is not the whole story of who they are.”
- † The problem is that it is often difficult to get in touch with our divine dimension, isn't it? What our son calls his lizard brain kicks in out of habit, and we strike out when we feel threatened.
- † I have a confession to make. As I try to become healthier and more fit, I have discovered a stationary bicycle at the Wave that maybe isn't so healthy. You enter a computer program that leads you on a virtual bike race through the scenery of your choice. There's a virtual pacer cyclist that gives you the incentive to keep up your speed.
- † But there are other virtual racers on the screen, too. The first time I came upon one on the screen, I reacted with horror as I ran into the figure, expecting that it would virtually crash. But no, the figure simply disappears. Vanishes.
- † The other day I completed my best course ever. The only problem was, I realized that I was enjoying bumping off the other virtual cyclists a little too much. Maybe that's why kids (and some adults) like video games.
- † We'd love to be in a world where if we just tried a little harder, we could eliminate the competition—the people that annoy us or frighten us.
- † But wait a minute. If we seek to follow Jesus, should the idea of peace—of shalom, shelem, make us physically sick? Should our best thrill be of wiping out those who aren't like us in belief or background or whatever separates us?
- † (Insert reflection on Brad Belke and Esther's friendship....)

† I love what Steve Garnaas-Holmes said in his devotional piece on today's scripture:

† *Jesus died strung up on the cross of division, the cross built of the make-believe lines we draw between insiders and out, protected and condemned, good and bad, us and them. There are no such lines. Sure, we should be good people. But it doesn't separate us from anybody. God's love makes no distinction between good people and bad, draws no line between the saved and the damned. There is no "them." There is only us.*

Get over your hostility. Learn to see through your belief that some people are "them," whoever your "them" is: people who don't believe the Apostle's Creed or work for justice or use inclusive language or call God father or accept gays or condemn gays or respect life. The love God gives you is so big that it makes the biggest distinctions you can think of into petty little details. Even the people who make these distinctions are "you," not "them."

God loves all of us. There is no them—get over it.

† If only it were that simple. But God gives us three sets of eyes—of the body, mind, and heart. Let's use them. And God gives us more than a lizard brain—let's learn to use the more divine brain.

† After all, we are created in the image of God, male and female, and God's way of peace is created in us, too. May we call upon the Prince of Peace who in turn calls upon us not only to preach peace but to live it.

† Shalom, shelem, salaam. Peace. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. John Claypool, “A Taste for the Other,” www.scec.org

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, “Unfolding Light,” July 16, 2009

Edward F. Markquart, “The Peace of God,”
www.sermonsfromseattle.com