

Channels of God's Peace

World Communion Sunday / Peacemaking Offering

Psalm 85:8-13 Matthew 5:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 5, 2014

The first Sunday in October each year, as most of you are aware, is designated as World Communion Sunday by most mainline Christian denominations. Its overall purpose is to **promote Christian unity**, and to recognize our oneness in Christ with Christians throughout the world. This yearly tradition, you may not know, originated in a single congregation in 1933, at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The practice of celebrating World Communion Sunday was adopted by the entire Presbyterian denomination three years later, in 1936. By 1940, the organization that now goes by the name, the National Council of Churches, endorsed World Communion Sunday and began to promote it to Christian churches worldwide.

Let's talk about Christian unity for a moment. In an age where our own denomination continues to splinter off into like-minded groups of individuals and congregations, it's not a bad idea to remind ourselves of **the unity between us that does exist through our mutual understanding that Jesus is our definitive revelation of the nature and character of God. I intentionally and carefully use the word, definitive, because for many of us progressive Christians, though our understanding of God comes in an authoritative way through Jesus, we believe that God can reveal God's nature and character outside of an exclusively Christian framework.**

Within the Christian framework, however, I don't think that it can be overstated enough that our particular approach to a life of faith is primarily guided by following Jesus' actual teachings – rather than simply giving our intellectual ascent to traditional Christian doctrine.

That means that **living out our faith through our words and deeds takes precedence, for most of us, over our particular beliefs about God and Jesus.** It is in and through the following of Jesus' teachings, therefore, that we are able to call ourselves Christians.

Our Presbyterian denomination, back in 1980, added another emphasis to this particular Sunday each year. That year's General Assembly adopted a paper entitled, *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling*, which called for an emphasis on Peacemaking across the denomination. College Hill signed on as a Peacemaking congregation. The yearly Peacemaking Offering, then, is therefore designated as a time for us as individuals, as a congregation, and as a denomination, to renew our commitment to peacemaking as part of our calling as followers of Jesus. **Our unity in Christ is also exhibited in and through our peacemaking efforts.**

Not surprisingly, the scripture passage from Matthew 5, known as the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, is chosen as a biblical text each year. For in verse 9, Jesus declares, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." From a theologically progressive perspective, **since most of us believe that all people**

are already children of God, perhaps that verse can best be interpreted in reverse: **As children of God, we are all called to be peacemakers.**

The question we face, then, is **what does it mean to be a peacemaker?** What does that look like for you as an individual – in your home, your school, your workplace, your times of leisure, when you're out running errands? What does that look like for us as a congregation? For us as Christians? Do I dare ask, for us as a nation?

On one hand, being a peacemaker involves an **internal** personal sense of peace, the peace of mind, body and spirit we experience within our own skin. Perhaps we can best describe it as serenity, an internal quality of being calm and still even in the midst of the storms we face in life. That's why I've long understood times of vacation or study leave to be a vital part of my own internal peacemaking efforts.

On the other hand, there's an **external** sense of peace, the peace we experience with others and with all of creation. So let me ask: Does Jesus' call to be peacemakers mean, however, that we should be against all war and military aggression – no matter what? Does being a peacemaker mean that non-violence is the only acceptable response to injustice, oppression and aggression? And have you noticed that you can't go very far down the road of talking about peace without entering the realm of politics?

While **I truly believe that we are called by God to peacemaking through non-violence**, I admit that I struggle with a proper response to current threats by organizations such as ISIS (or ISIL). Is the military option that has been chosen truly the best option left to stop such heinous acts of public executions and acts of terrorism? Along those same lines, as our military option justified as a response after 9-11 to stop Al-Qaida? To stop Hitler? To end slavery in this country? To gain our independence from England?

In trying to deal with a sinful world filled with a sinful humans, perhaps responding to violence with yet more violence is our only understandable response in order to restore order and protect from harm those who are innocent. But this indeed falls, in my opinion, under the category of having to choose between the better of two evils.

That being said, **we must never stop working as hard as we can to promote an approach of non-violence. And that means verbal, psychological, and spiritual nonviolence, as well as physical. That should always be the ideal to which we strive, for this is how we believe God would have us live in relationship.**

We must continue to cling to the apostle Paul's admonishment in Romans 12:21 to overcome evil not with more evil, but with good. That is our challenge. And it's a tough one.

Our commitment to living a life that follows the ways and teachings of Jesus must be accompanied by a commitment to non-violent peacemaking. **Peacemaking must become, in fact, a vital part of our own spirituality and spiritual practices.**

Interestingly, one of the persons hailed as twentieth century's most Christ-like figure was Mahatma Gandhi. He, of course, wasn't a Christian, but a Hindu. Yet Gandhi hung up a picture of Jesus with an inscription below that read, "He is our Peace." And as Gandhi used to say, if Christians had actually done what Jesus taught us to do – namely, love our enemy – the world would long ago have been transformed. He strongly believed that an eye for an eye would only make the whole world blind.

So we, as Gandhi suggested, **must turn our belief in Jesus into following the practices of Jesus.** With Western Christianity's current obsession with personal salvation of the individual soul, it seems like it has almost forgotten this most crucial part of

Christianity. Therefore, actually following the teachings of Jesus is what progressive Christianity is trying hard to rectify.

And let us not forget that **there is indeed a very real connection between living in peace and establishing justice for all persons.** That's why I love the visual image painted in **Psalm 85:10, "Righteousness and peace will kiss each other."** It encourages us to imagine and work toward a world where justice and peace reign together, with the goal of working for the well-being of all.

On this World Communion Sunday – and as part of the celebration of our unity with brothers and sisters across this sanctuary, across the street, across the nation, and across globe – strive, as children of God, through your (and our) words and actions, to be peacemakers, instruments and channels of God's peace.

Amen.