

Experiencing & Extending Peace

World Communion Sunday / Peace & Global Witness Offering

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 1, 2023

Isn't it wonderful to live in such peaceful times when everyone is living together in harmonious unity? Okay, no more sarcasm. I should have started with: Aren't you getting tired and fed up with the constant bombardment of negativity, divisiveness, and polarization in almost every realm of societal, political, and religious life? Admittedly, in the times we live in it's almost impossible not to pick a side and then vehemently defend our own opinions (even if only internally in our own minds) in ways that lead to even more divisiveness, separation, and disunity. At times, we label others as 'haters' when indeed we may harbor similar feelings ourselves.

Then, we come to church and hear the familiar words ascribed to Jesus that we find almost impossible to follow, "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God**" (Matt. 5:9). That comes from the section called The Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Yes, we are blessed whenever we contribute to being peacemakers.

What does making peace look like for you as an individual – in your home, workplace, school, or other organization in which you are involved? What does peace look like within yourself? What does making peace look like for us as a congregation? What does that look like for those who identify themselves as Christians, with our myriad of theological disagreements? Do I dare ask, what does peacemaking look like for us as a nation, both within our own country and throughout the world? By the way, I could ask all the same questions substituting the concept of "unity" for "peacemaking". Let's explore this for a moment.

On one hand, being a peacemaker involves an **internal** personal sense of being at peace within one's own skin. Perhaps we can describe it as serenity, an internal quality of being calm and still even while navigating the storms we face in life. **It is this internal peace of mind that, for many, seems more and more elusive and hard to hang onto, no matter what method we try**, like meditation, prayer, reading, music, journaling, therapy, etc.

On the other hand, there's an **external** sense of peace, a peace with others. During this particular sermon I don't want to specifically address the issue of peacemaking in the context of military aggression and war, as important as those efforts are at finding peace throughout the world. Saying that, let's sincerely continue to pray for peace in Ukraine, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Instead, I want to address the issue of **how we might live out our calling to be peacemakers amid such polarizing divisiveness**.

On this World Communion Sunday, when we pay special attention to our connectedness with all God's children across the globe, we also collect the annual Peace & Global Witness Offering that goes to support the national Presbyterian

Peacemaking Program, as well as efforts within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, and the peacemaking efforts within this congregation. We have used this collection in many different ways over the years, including anti-racism efforts, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and Interfaith collaboration.

A few years ago, the theme for the offering was entitled "A Season of Peace." It includes the following statement as part of its introductory material:

Peacemaking is our calling as Christians, today as in every age. And the way we make peace, especially in a violent and conflict-ridden world, is not by eliminating all conflicts but by learning to address them through peaceful means; namely, through dialogue, education, and knowledge.

Dialogue, education, and knowledge. How very Presbyterian! These three approaches toward peacemaking have the combined effect of helping to minimize ignorance and prejudice, a leading cause of conflict. They are also non-violent ways to deal with others with whom we find ourselves in conflict.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" are words of Jesus that work to provide not only comfort but also a challenge. The internal and external elements of peacemaking are reflected in that Peacemaking Program when it rightly states, **"The pursuit of God's peace is both an inner and outer journey where the well-being of one is held in the well-being of all."** These words, in themselves, reflect one of the guiding mantras of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his efforts to build what he called the Beloved Community.

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, "Justice and peace shall kiss each other."** It encourages us to imagine and work toward a world, and certainly the kin-dom of God, when justice and peace reign together. Exploring the subject of peacemaking is an invitation for us to catch a vision of what God intends the world to be. Scripture presents a vision of "shalom." **Shalom is the Hebrew word that envisions a world that seeks justice, peace, and the well-being of one and all. We are indeed living in a world that is starved for a fulfillment of that vision. It is our task to address that hunger.**

How do we, then, put the often-bad news of the world around us into the context of God's Good News. One of the things I like most about Christianity, when it is functioning at its best, is its underlying message of liberation and civility – as in the Golden Rule, treating others as we would like to be treated. For it is indeed liberating to take even one step, however small, in the direction of God's vision of shalom and a world at peace. **The goal of peace, using its broadest definition, includes any ministry and secular program that works for the wholeness and well-being of all of God's creation.** For us, this includes ministries that offer God's peace wherever there is brokenness – in individual lives, families, congregations, communities, nations, and the environment. Peacemaking can mean contributing to the needs of a local food pantry, as we do regularly here at College Hill. It can mean supporting the establishment of a neighborhood health clinic, an after-school program, a domestic violence initiative, a prison ministry, anti-bullying education, supporting an organization that promotes equality or reconciliation, projects that help those who are coping in the midst of a tragedy or natural disaster, or overcoming an addiction, and in new ways of living that promote a healthy environment.

As individuals and as a congregation I invite us all to continue to study, reflect and discuss the issues involved with justice and peace - and then put them into action. In that way, we become instruments of God's peace. We become peacemakers. I also invite us to keep in our hearts and minds the image in Psalm 85:10, of a world where justice and peace are united in relationship.

On this World Communion Sunday, as part of the celebration of our oneness and unity with siblings across this sanctuary, across the street, across the nation, and across the globe, strive, as children of God, to be a peacemaker. May that always be a primary guiding principle for our life and ministry here at College Hill. For it's one of those issues that fall into the category of: If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem.

Within both our inward and outward journey of faith, may we experience and also extend peace and unity.

Amen.