

## **Fruit of the Spirit:**

### **The Comfort and Discomfort of Peace**

Reminder (from Galatians 5:22-23): “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Our fruit for the day is peace.

Rather than read just one or two Scriptures, here are a bunch! It seemed more effective to bring the word to you this way today. I’ll be referring to a couple of these along the way. I’ve put them into two broad categories: Inward peace—peace of heart and mind—and outward peace—peace between people and in society. These categories could also be labelled as: the peace we are *given*, and the peace that we *give*.

#### **God Gives Us Peace**

*Do not worry about anything, but pray about everything, with thanksgiving, and the peace of God, which passes understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7*

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

John 14:27

*Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—in peace because they trust in you.* Isaiah 26:3

*For the Kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* Romans 14:17.

*For he (Jesus) is our peace; in his flesh he has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us... He proclaimed peace to those who were far off, and peace to those who were near.* Ephesians 2:14, 17

### **God Calls Us to Peace**

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*  
Matthew 5:9

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Romans 12:17-18

*Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.* Hebrews 12:14

*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*

Ephesians 4:1, 3

*Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. Psalm 34:14*

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Colossians 3:15*

*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits... And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. James 3:16-18*

These are *representative* Scriptures; there is more where these came from! I'll be referring to a couple of the passages as we go, so for now...

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Movie, comedy-drama, with the lead actor playing the role of Adolph Hitler. In one scene he is responding to complaints from world leaders, and he does so by breaking into a song: "Peace! Peace! All I want is a little peace... a little piece of Poland, a little piece of France, a little piece of Portugal, and Austria by chance..." Funny, but not funny.

Is that how peace is achieved? By force? Historically, some have thought so, going all the way back to the Roman empire, which proclaimed the "Pax Romana" (peace of Rome). Which really meant, "Do everything we say and we won't kill you." Is that peace? (for the record, I don't think so)

I discovered something this week in researching these peace passages: that joy and peace are often mentioned together in the Bible.

For example, in Philippians 4—from last week, and listed in part this morning: it begins with joy (“rejoice in the Lord always”) and ends with receiving the peace of God which passes understanding. Joy and peace bookend that passage.

From Isaiah 55, also from last week’s service—you shall go out with *joy* and be led forth with *peace*; and

Rom.14:17—the Kingdom of God is righteousness, *peace* and *joy* in the Holy Spirit.

And, joy and peace are listed one right after the other in the fruit of the Spirit. They go together.

So, I was thinking I could just give last Sunday’s sermon all over again, and replace the word joy with the word peace and it would mostly ring true.

Especially the point that it’s something we have, as a gift, *and* it’s something to choose—it’s something we have, *and* it’s something we choose. And not just for ourselves, but for others.

And therein lies a big difference between joy and peace, as an external experience: As an *external* experience, we might say that joy is contagious, but

peace is mandated. Joy spreads naturally, but peace must be cultivated. We must work to make peace where and when we can.

As an *interior* experience, like joy and all the other fruit of the Spirit, peace is something that grows in us over time—the more we consent to the Holy Spirit, the more it grows in us, and becomes easier to access, and we find it easier to calm ourselves and experience that peace that passes understanding. And perhaps it becomes easier to *practice* as we become peacemakers in our daily lives, because we're forming a habit, or a reflex of being peacemakers.

Peace is something we have, from the Spirit, as a gift, and peace is something we choose. We see this consistently through both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. The grand OT Hebrew word “shalom” which means wholeness, wellness, completeness, harmony, carries over into the NT Greek word “eirene” which means to join together to make one, or bind together into a whole. It's practically the same meaning.

How important is peace? The concept of peace is embedded into many cultures around the world:

“Peace be with you” is a common greeting in many cultures. For example, on the streets of Israel people greet one another with the word “Shalom”; and, in

Arab Muslim countries they say “Salaam alaikum” (peace be upon you). And the response is: “wa alaikum salaam,” which means “and peace be upon you.”

In some eastern cultures, particularly in India: people press their hands together in front of their chest and bow, perhaps saying, “Namaste.” A gesture of humility and peace and wellbeing.

In New Zealand, there is a traditional Maori greeting called the hongi, where two people press their foreheads together as they greet one another, and make eye contact. That’s really bad social distancing right now, but that peaceful greeting is embedded into Maori culture.

And if you’re from a culture called the 1960’s you made the peace sign...

These are just a few examples of ways that people greet each other to signify peace. Gestures of peace are embedded in many cultures around the world.

It’s also embedded into the life of the church: we pass the peace in worship, it’s that important to us, and to God. Although it may cause conflict because some churches don’t like it. I can tell you that from experience. I introduced it into the worship life at one church and they hated it. Session got more complaint letters about that than anything else. The joke at that church became, “If you want to cause conflict, pass the peace!”

We long for peace in our hearts and in our relationships and in society, don't we? The world longs for it. Many of us pray for it every day, especially these days; and we work for peace in our own way, especially these days.

But it seems to elude us. Even in churches; notice how many of Paul's admonitions to pursue peace are directed at the fellowship of the church. As someone once said, paraphrasing Jesus, "Wherever two are three are gathered in Jesus' name, there will be a conflict over what we're doing in Jesus' name..."

We long for peace. But if we're honest with ourselves, we are also people who like to have things our way. And when we want to have things our way, it's difficult to achieve peace. Peace requires a certain amount of compromise. Sometimes, sacrifice. It requires being servants. It requires setting aside some personal wants and comforts for the greater good.

What is peace? It is often defined in terms of what it *isn't*—as in, it's the absence of conflict or the absence of distraction or anything that makes us feel uncomfortable or disturbed. In fact, the dictionary's first definition of peace is, "The absence of disturbance." The second definition is, "A state or period in which there is no war, or a war has ended." You know, a nation is at peace when they're not involved in any wars; a person is at peace when they don't have conflict and they feel relaxed and comfortable.

But what if I told you that the biblical idea of peace sometimes means *diving into* conflict, choosing discomfort, and being disturbed?

Remember what Paul says about peace in Ephesians 2 (and think of this especially in light of racial reconciliation and peacemaking in our country):

“For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body *through the cross*, thereby bringing hostility to an end.” There is a great passage for our time, I’d say!

According to Ephesians, Jesus is our peace, and Jesus came to reconcile us all to God and to each other. And the biblical idea of peace is not simply the absence of conflict but also the presence of harmony. It’s not ceasefire; it’s community. And achieving community sometimes means that we set aside comfort and take the risk of vulnerability in seeking peace.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in seeking peace for ourselves that we actually create discord for others, and with others. Or we isolate ourselves from a problem... by moving out of the city to that peaceful cabin in the woods, for instance—literally, or in our minds—so that we can pretend like the problem doesn’t exist or isn’t relevant to us. But conflict avoidance is not peace.

In fact, sometimes, pursuing real peace—Jesus-peace—means *engaging in* conflict. I know from experience that, whether in my marriage or in ministry, I can tend to want to sweep tension under the rug and hope it will just dissipate on its own instead of engaging it with the hope of better understanding, and reconciliation and partnership and true harmony. Engaging it means breaking down the walls and facing the “hostility” if you will (to use Paul’s words) for the sake of peace in the true Biblical sense of that word: wholeness, wellness, harmony.

This all is uncomfortable and emotionally taxing. Especially for white people right now, engaging the conversation and the work of black lives matter and racial reconciliation, it means hearing things we don’t want to hear, and staying in the conversation. It means leaning into relationships when we want to run away. It means listening and learning when we’d rather talk and justify ourselves or tell other people what their opinions should be. It means believing in a kind of reconciliation that looks unlikely, and trusting Jesus for an outcome that looks like wholeness and a deeper sense of wellbeing. Peace takes work.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant young German pastor and theologian who came of age during the rise of Nazism. Bonhoeffer was a Christian pacifist (that’s how he interpreted Jesus’ teachings), yet because of conscience and seeing

the deep suffering that was being inflicted at the hands of his own government, he decided to participate in a plot to have Adolf Hitler assassinated. The authorities found out about it, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and then executed right before the end of the war. But before his imprisonment Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote some of the most influential works on the Christian life, faith, ethics, and discipleship, which are still taught today. Because it's so relevant today.

In 1934 Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke at an ecumenical conference of world church leaders (btw, 1934 is the year that Adolf Hitler became fuehrer). At the conference, Bonhoeffer said this regarding Christ's command to be peacemakers in the world: "Peace on earth is not a problem, but a command at Christ's coming. There are two ways of reacting to this command of God: the unconditional obedience of action, or the hypocritical question of the serpent in the garden: 'Did God really say that? What did God really mean by that anyway?' This latter question is the mortal enemy of peace."

A little later on he continues: "How does peace come about? Through a system of political treaties? Through the investment of international capital in different countries? Through the big banks, through money? [No] Through none of these, for the single reason that in all of them peace is confused with safety. There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is

the great venture. It can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war.”

Well, there’s some food for thought! Bonhoeffer’s view here is that for there to be true peace, we must set aside our desire for comfort, security and control, and venture into the sometimes-uncomfortable call of God in Christ to be reconcilers and peacemakers, from a stance of great humility, like Christ, through the cross of Christ. Whether that is in our communities, or between people of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Or within families.

This is the work of bridging the racial divide and working toward reconciliation and understanding and equality right now. And, to repeat something I said a couple minutes ago, it begins by believing in a kind of reconciliation that looks unlikely, and trusting Jesus for an outcome that looks like wholeness and a deeper sense of wellbeing for everyone.

And we *can* trust Jesus to provide those outcomes, because Jesus *is* our peace, as the Scriptures say. And, while pursuing harmony and reconciliation may be hard work sometimes, it is far from hopeless. In fact, the truth is just the opposite: peace is promised to us from God. We heard it in all of our Scriptures. It is ours as a gift, and it is there when we work toward it. “The kingdom of God *is*

righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” So, in a sense, it’s already there. We just need to lay hold of it. Claim it, even as we work toward it.

I struggle to live in that kingdom from day to day because I don't have the spiritual or emotional resources on my own to really put in the work that peace requires. But this is when the Spirit bears fruit, supplying me with what I lack (if I remember just to ask), and reminding me that the hardest reconciliation work of all is already done, as it tells us in 2Cor.5:17-18: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new! All these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

God has done the heavy lifting, in Christ, to reconcile and make peace. Now, it’s our responsibility to follow Christ, the Prince of Peace, in the way of peace.

Blessing from 2Thessalonians 3:16: “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times, in all ways. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.” And all of God’s people said...