

## **Becoming Peace**

### **John 14:25-27    Philippians 4:4-6**

Short series on “How, then, shall we live?” With covid uncertainty, change, unrest and divisiveness, what are some good practices and principles we can apply to follow Jesus in this time and in our neighborhoods and communities?

Last week: the art of listening. Today and next Sunday, the theme is peace: first, having peace; and then, being peacemakers. This morning we’ll reflect on having inner peace. Next Sunday, on making peace, being peacemakers.

A good charge and blessing for changing and challenging times (which it was in the first century): 1Cor. 16:13-14: Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

### **John 14:25-27**

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 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.

### **Philippians 4:4-7**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness (read: peacefulness; calmness) be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

It has been said by many of our wise spiritual ancestors and contemporary activists, that if we want to *have* peace, we must *become* peace. If we want peace *out there*, we need to cultivate it *in here*. It's both-and: peace in here, peace out there. One can't really exist without the other. Sometimes we can cultivate peace *in here* by making peace *out there*—that is, doing peaceful actions creates in me a sense of inner peace and satisfaction. I suppose it doesn't matter which comes first, but today we'll look first at inner peace. Or, *becoming* peace, as has been taught over the centuries.

There is so much that can be said here, but I'm going to try to keep it simple and give us a couple of things to think about with regard to pathways to inner peace, and then share one prayer practice and one story, to see if something captures your imagination and speaks to your heart.

Here are a couple of thoughts on pathways into peace. More like a couple of words to ponder. They both happen to begin with the letter P, like peace. So, in the spirit of Sesame Street, today's sermon is brought to you by the letter P!

One pathway into peace, or to becoming peace, is by accepting **paradox**. Accept paradox. Plain old “acceptance” by itself is a great word and a needed practice, but in particular we need to learn to accept paradox. That is, to learn to think, ‘both-and.’ Even if the both-and’s seem contradictory, or don’t make sense. We (humanity) have become such ‘either-or’ thinkers and believers, and it’s making us uptight and anxious and I would even say judgmental. Because when something or someone doesn’t fit into this or that category, or we don’t have it buttoned down and categorized and figured out, it can make us uptight. We lose our peace.

It’s why our country is so polarized. Because we see everything as a simple binary. Right—wrong. Left—right. They’re good—they’re bad. Us—they. Binary thinking is creating a tribal society, where people feel like they have to decide what tribe they belong to, and don’t belong to. And it’s as true in the Church and theological thinking as it is in politics or opinions about masks and vaccines. If you want to find a bazillion examples of binary thinking, just get on Facebook for a few minutes. If you can read what’s there dispassionately, you’ll clearly see binary, either-or thinking (right-wrong, dumb-smart, liberal-conservative, and all the other labels that are used; and the bazillion Facebook groups that identify with a particular tribe).

But if we can take a step back, and take a few deep breaths and clear our minds and think about it, we realize that most of life isn't like that—it isn't simply either-or. It's more nuanced. And, for me, way more interesting. *People* are more interesting than that. We just need time to sit with each other in a posture of listening more—which is a big ask, I know! But Jesus asks some pretty big things of his followers. We need to become better at both-and. To accept paradox as part of life. Or, not just *part* of life, but life itself! Because a lot of life is both-and. Or, sometimes life just doesn't make sense (and perhaps it isn't always supposed to).

So I would invite you to experiment with both-and thinking. For example, with regard to the ongoing pandemic, we could say, “This is terrible, and many people are struggling; and, during this time many families are growing closer together, people are making solid positive life changes, and it's beneficial.” Some of us could say, “This is an anxious time for me, *and*, I'm learning some things—about myself, or through intentional learning opportunities I would not have chosen to do in routine times.”

One woman I met recently said that in her struggles with anxiety she took up knitting (not hard to learn with online videos!). It gave her something to do

with her hands, and it helped focus her mind, and it has calmed her down. She's knitting blankets for winter shelters for the homeless. Cool!

I think of people who have been looking for jobs, and struggling to find them. They can say, "I'm competent and smart, *and*, I'm flowing with life's realities day-to-day in a tough job market."

I remember a former congregant who was living with (and dying from) cancer, who every day would say his life was amazing and filled with good things. "I'm living with cancer; *and*, it's a wonderful life," he would say. He had peace; he became peace. He learned to live with that paradox.

Thinking like this helps to calm us down and accept life coming to us on its own terms. And it helps us to see God and faith on their own terms! As I've mentioned before, this both-and thinking applies to the gospel. The gospel is not *either* prayer and evangelism and saving souls, *or*, social justice and activism. It's both-and. Jesus never separated those things. And, Jesus used paradox a lot in his parables, and in his teachings. For example, in one parable a farmer sows seed in the ground, and Jesus says the seed is the Word of God. In another parable another farmer sows seed and Jesus says the seeds are the children of the

Kingdom. So which is it? Are we the seeds, or is the Word of God the seed? The answer is: Yes! It's both!

I'm pretty sure this is why Paul talks about the peace that *surpasses all understanding*. If we want it, we have to release the need to understand it. How God works in prayer is sometimes (or often?) a mystery; paradox. Same with Jesus, who said, "I don't give as the world gives." In other words, not with clear easy answers or simple remedies. This is the Holy Spirit at work, beyond or underneath our senses. Paradoxically, bringing us peace.

So, I can say to myself, I feel exhausted and overwhelmed sometimes because of, well, *everything, and*, positive changes are happening and we get a glimpse of those day by day. Then I can take a deep breath and step back and know that I'll be okay, you'll be okay, our communities will be okay. Because the God of paradox is with us! We don't have to burst a vein in our head trying to figure it all out. We can embrace reality for what it is; we can trust.

Another pathway to peace, to becoming peace, is by getting **perspective**. Perspective. That's what accepting paradox will do. Help us to see a bigger picture. For example, in ambiguous times, in liminal spaces and seasons, as we accept reality for what it is and allow life and faith to come to us on its own terms,

perspective helps us to say, “The *situation* is bonkers; not a particular *person*.”

The *situation* is bonkers; not the person. And ‘the person’ might be me! I’m not bonkers; the situation is. Again, as we are able, we try to step back, take a deep breath, and hopefully realize we’ll be okay. People are acting out—sometimes I act out! But often it’s the environment around us that doesn’t help bring out the best in people. So, getting perspective helps us see a bigger picture.

Perspective also helps us realize and accept that we are not in control. At least not of very much. There is something much bigger going on, and I can consent to God’s gracious activity in the bigger picture; and the smaller picture too. God is at work! There is never a time when God isn’t at work. Our job, so to speak, is to show up each day and pay attention (“keep alert” as Paul puts it), cooperate with God, and then release the outcome. This has become like a mantra for me: show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, release the outcome. Because ultimately, we are not in control; not of much, at least. Outcomes belong to God.

Let me say, parenthetically, while it’s true we aren’t in control of much, there are a couple things we can control: our reactions to things (our attitude),

and our actions (the things we can do within our sphere of influence and ability).

That's what we'll think about together next Sunday.

If we lose perspective about our life and faith or the world, we lose personal peace. And if we lose perspective about others, we lose *interpersonal* peace. That happens when people see others only as "other." That's binary thinking again, and the 'other' becomes "one of *those* people"—a potential threat, or a problem. Not-from-our-tribe. Not-like-us. Yes, we need to protect ourselves and others and set healthy boundaries, but there is a way to do it without demonizing others, or pulling in on ourselves. Again, that's next week. Stay tuned!

Perspective helps us see that we're all in this together.

These are a couple of pathways into peace, of becoming peace—accepting paradox and getting perspective. It's funny, as I was preparing the sermon, other "P" words came to mind: prayer, patience, perseverance, playfulness and positivity, and so on. Funny how that happens sometimes. All of those are good!

Let me remind us of one practice we can try, and then share a story that might encourage us. Both will invite you to use your imagination, and even engage your body a little bit.

The practice we can try, which I've shared before, is the sacred heart prayer. The image of the Sacred Heart has been a beloved Catholic image and symbol for at least 8 centuries. There are many artistic versions of this symbol, and they all reflect the very heart of Christ, of "God's boundless and passionate love for all humankind" (as it says in the explanation from the Catholic church).

This is a beautiful image, and can stir a person's devotion, but here is how this can be meaningful, and practical, and lead us into peace. And contribute to peace in our relationships. First, is to know that because Christ dwells in your heart (as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 3:17, that Christ dwells in our hearts, as we are rooted and grounded in love), because Christ dwells in your heart, know that you, too, have a sacred heart. It's true; the sacred heart of Christ, and your heart, are united, spiritually. Take it on faith; lay hold of that truth. It matters not how you feel about yourself or your heart—only what God has said: that your heart and the heart of Christ are united.

Now, take that image and belief into prayer. Many have described prayer as bringing our thinking down into our heart. We so often pray in our heads, but the goal is to move into our hearts in prayer. So, try this: next time a disturbing thought, image, negativity, or irritation comes into your mind, and you are

tempted to play it out in your head or latch onto it, instead move that thought or person into your heart space—literally. Imagine holding that thought, or person in your heart space for a moment. Place your hands there. And then, in that place, surround this negativity with quiet (which is much easier to do in the heart) and with your warm pumping blood (the life-flow, which will often feel warm like coals).

In this place, it becomes difficult to comment, judge, create story lines, or remain antagonistic. You are in a place that does not create or feed on contraries or binaries, but is the natural organ of life, and love. Love lives and thrives in the heart space.

This practice can keep us from obsessive, or compulsive head games. It can make the difference between being peaceful, or being perplexed and disturbed. This can be our practice when we pray for someone (whether a friend or foe). When we pray for them, we are holding them in our heart space, surrounded by the warm life-flow. And after we hold them and pray for them, release them to God.

This can be one of our contributions to making peace too. To learn to see others not just as “other,” but as also held close to the heart of God.

Now, a story. We're going to go outside for a moment. I've also told this one before. This story comes from Kathy "Killian" Noe. Founder of Recovery Café in Seattle. She tells a story of a time when on a warm sunny summer day, she and her husband and a group of friends were floating down a lazy river and enjoying a relaxing day. As they were in the second half of their river float, they ran over a rock in the water and their raft was overturned and floated out of their reach. They knew, as the day began, that there were dangerous rapids downriver, which under normal circumstances they would have avoided by paddling their raft ashore. That was the plan as they set out, to exit the river before the rapids.

But there they were, each of them, down the river without a paddle. Literally. But not to worry, someone on the riverbank saw what happened and told them that a few folks had driven down to a bridge and were lowering ropes for them to grab onto and pull them to shore. A wall of ropes waiting for them!

Killian freaked out, though, and tried to swim against the current, mostly tried to put her feet down, only to have the current sweep her feet out from under her, or pull her under. She tried to swim for the shore but there were branches hanging over the side of the river and if she grabbed one she just got swamped by the water flowing over her; so she had to let go.

Then, in one moment while flailing in the water, she turned and saw her husband, floating happily on his back in the middle of the river like he didn't have a care in the world. And it occurred to her that he had gotten the message that there would be a rope for him to grab onto eventually; so... he may as well enjoy the ride until he got there. Anxiously flailing and trying to save herself wasn't helping her. Here is another example of paradox: if I try too hard, it can often make things worse. But if I relax into a situation, I'll receive the help I need.

Peace is knowing that I don't *have to* freak out. Freaking out and panic are sometimes a natural first response, but I don't *have to* remain freaked out—it's not *required!* Help will come. Or, I will get to help, in time. So, I can 'go with the flow' of life and let it come to me on its own terms—even when life's raft gets overturned. Because help will be there. God provides what we need, when it's needed, at the right time. Even if it takes time.

Let me leave you with another one of the apostle Paul's beautiful blessings to his church at the end of one of his letters:

2Thessalonians 3:16: "Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you."