The Comfort and Challenge of Peace

Fruit of the Spirit series this fall with an approach of: how do we receive these, and live them out, in today's world? Our fruit for this week is peace.

Our next reading is from Ephesians 2:11-22, and I'll be reading the First Nations Version (insert). There was a council of 12 Native Christian people from Navajo, Nez Perce, Pawnee, Choctaw, Cherokee, Ojibwe, Potawatomi nations, along with Mending Wings ministries and Wycliffe Bible translators, among others, who did the good and scholarly work of translating the New Testament into English, using vocabulary that indigenous peoples would use in speaking English and telling the Jesus story. It's a very good translation, helpful, and enjoyable to read. So let's listen to it (follow along on the insert if you like).

Ephesians 2:11-22
First Nations Version—An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament

You Nations must not forget that before you knew the Chosen One you were not natural-born members of the tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel). You were called "the outsiders" by the ones who call themselves "the insiders." But remember, the sign that marks them as insiders is cut into their flesh with human hands.

You Outside Nations did not share in the promises or the peace treaty that the Great Spirit made with those tribes. You were out from under their special care and protection—unaware of and apart from the Chosen One. You shared no common hope and were outside the help Creator gave to them in this world.

But no more! Even though you Outside Nations were far away, you have now been made close by the lifeblood offered by Creator Sets Free (Jesus), the Chosen One. He is our great peace, who has brought the people of all Nations together with the tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel), making them into one new people by removing the barrier that separated us.

In his own human body he removed the hostility between us when he did away with the rules and requirements of our tribal law that separated us. This is the way he recreates people—making one new humanity out of the two. This brings us all together on the path of peace.

Even though we behaved like enemies, we are now friends with the Great Spirit and with one another. When Creator Sets Free (Jesus) died on the cross, those things that made us enemies died with him. We are now joined together as one people in one body. He brought this good story of peace and harmony to people who were far away from him and to people who were close to him. Because of him we both have a clear path, through one Spirit, to the Father from above.

[Now we are all his holy people and members of one new nation. No one is on the outside of this great family that our Father is creating. We are all related to one another and initiated into Creator's lodge that is built together with wooden poles—the message bearers and prophets of old. Creator Sets Free (Jesus) is the main pole binding us together, like branches being weaved into his sacred lodge. Joined together in this way, we become a dwelling place for his Spirit.]

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 about what he's doing, and he responds to their complaints 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.

It sounds like Vladimir Putin's justification for his invasion of Ukraine: he's "saving" Ukrainians from Nazis. Just trying to bring a little peace, he says, but what he really wants is a large piece of land that is not his to take.

Is that how peace is achieved? By force and occupation? Historically, some have thought so, going all the way back to the Roman empire, which proclaimed

the “Pax Romana”—the peace of Rome. Which really meant, “Do everything we say and we won’t kill you.” Which isn’t really peace. That’s fear!

In researching the peace passages of the Bible, which run through it like a golden thread, I discovered something: that joy and peace are often mentioned together in the Bible.

For example, in Philippians 4, one of our readings from last week, 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*. Joy and peace lead the procession!

You heard 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.

One of the reasons they are often listed together is that peace and joy overlap quite a bit in experience and in meaning. Where there is joy there is often peace, and where there is true peace there is joy. Another reason they go together is that peace, like joy, is something we have, as a gift, *and* it’s something to choose. It’s something we have, *and* it’s something we need to choose.

There is one big difference between joy and peace, however, as an *external* experience. As an *internal* experience, joy and peace are felt as pleasant experiences. But *externally* there is a difference: 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 and sustain peace where and when we can.

Peace is both an interior experience, as a gift, and it is an exterior mandate, as you heard in the readings that Linda read for us.

The grand OT Hebrew word "shalom," which means wholeness, wellbeing, completeness, harmony, and even joy, 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, and we get that sense from the Eph.2 passage, of peace as a unifier, and a binding agent.

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 worldwide.

In indigenous cultures, especially in America, there is a principle of their culture called "The Harmony Way." A couple weeks ago I quoted from Cherokee Christian theologian Randy Woodley, who studied indigenous cultures worldwide

and found that every native culture had some form of what Native *Americans* call The Harmony Way. Where peace, or harmony, is a part of everything that they think and do, not just in human relationships but in their relationships with plants and animals, with land and water and air; in their farming and in their families. There is an understanding that everything is interconnected, and part of a whole. And in order to maintain harmony, we act in peaceful ways with "all my relations" as many indigenous folks say. "All my relations" including trees and animals and so forth, as well as humans.

Along that line, Chief Seattle, leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes in our area, said this, in a speech he gave to the city of Seattle's founders and developers (as part of his urging them to take care of the natural world): "All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Human beings did not weave the web of life, we are merely one strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves." Think about that: whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

So deeply embedded is the Harmony Way in the indigenous understanding of the created order as a web of life, that they know that whatever is done to the *soil and land* is done to us. Whatever is done to *animals* is done to us. Whatever we do to the *air*, or to *water*, to the *trees*, we do to ourselves. And, of course,

what we do to *others* we do to ourselves. This is akin to Jesus' words, "What you reap, you sow." And, "Do to others as you would have others do to you." Those statements are Harmony Way statements.

So, the *concept* of peace (harmony, shalom), and *gestures* of peace are embedded in many cultures around the world.

It's also embedded into the life of the Church, historically: 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. Passing the peace was introduced into the worship life at one church I served years ago and many of the members disliked 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!" Which is ironic (and not irenic!).

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

But shalom, harmony, 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, the peace that is mandated, requires a certain amount of compromise, and sacrifice. It requires being servants. It requires setting aside some personal wants 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 what 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 disturbances and they feel relaxed and comfortable.

But what if I told you that the *biblical* idea of peace sometimes means *diving into* some necessary conflict, and choosing short-term discomfort for long-term wellbeing and harmony?

According to Ephesians, as we heard, Jesus is our peace, and Jesus came to reconcile us all to God and to each other—*in his body on the cross*! In other words, through discomfort and sacrifice.

The biblical idea of peace is not simply the absence of conflict but also the presence of wellbeing, and harmony. It's not just ceasefire; it's community. And achieving community and harmony sometimes means that we take the risk of vulnerability in seeking peace by working out difficult things, and having difficult conversations.

And, it means taking a posture of listening and learning when we would rather share our opinions or justify ourselves. Peace means believing that reconciliation is possible, and working toward that, trusting God for an outcome that looks like wholeness and a deeper sense of wellbeing for everyone. Peace often takes work. And, it can take time.

Here is some food for thought from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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 made the difficult decision to participate in a plot to have Adolf Hitler

assassinated—he believed it would be for the greater good. The authorities found out about it, however, and Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in a concentration camp, and then executed right before the end of the war. But before his imprisonment Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote influential works on the Christian life, and faith, ethics, and discipleship, which are still taught today. Because it's so brilliant, and all 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 in Germany). 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 to be peacemakers, 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? 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. True 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 may have been young and idealistic when he said these things (he was only 39 when he died), but he was taking Jesus' teachings seriously, and explaining why, as Jesus said, the peacemakers are blessed, because they are willing to set aside a desire for comfort, security and control, and venture into the sometimes-uncomfortable call of God to be reconcilers and peacemakers, from a posture of great humility, like Jesus Christ.

Speaking of the humility of Jesus, and to bring this practice of peacemaking to a more personal level, one of my favorite examples of Jesus being a peacemaker occurs in John's gospel, in chapter 8. Try to picture this: Jesus is teaching at the temple in Jerusalem, in one of the outer courts, and a group of Pharisees who supposedly caught a woman in adultery bring her to him, and with ill-intent they throw the book at him saying, "The law says she should be put to death. What do you say?" Instant conflict! A woman's life is at stake, a legal and moral and religious issue is put forth, and this is taking place at the temple, the religious center of Judaism at that time. And there is an audience there, watching

this whole thing develop. Can you feel the tension? What is going to happen? How will Jesus respond?

Well, in that moment Jesus does something strange: he bends down and starts writing in the sand on the ground with his finger, and that's all we're told. For centuries, scholars have tried to figure out, what did Jesus write?? Was it words, a message of some kind? Did he draw a picture? Was he doodling? John doesn't tell us, so we're not meant to know. And here, I think, is why: because what he wrote or drew isn't important; what's important is that Jesus just did something weird, and unexpected, and it de-escalated the tension. This is a great example of paradoxical and curious behavior de-escalating a highly anxious and contentious situation. Because it slowed things down and helped everyone take a pause, and diverted their attention and energy away from the person and the manufactured conflict at hand, and caused everyone to go, "What the heck is he doing?"

Then after a moment of silence, and curiosity, Jesus stands back up and says those famous words, "Let anyone without sin be the first to throw a stone." And then he bends back down and writes in the sand again. And you can picture the people going, "Wait, what? What just happened here?" And John tells us, the Pharisees begin to walk away. Partly because of a brilliant one-liner from

Jesus, and, because Jesus broke the tension with paradoxical behavior. And *humble* behavior, because for Jesus to draw on the ground would've meant that he got low. He literally humbled himself. In conflict situations people often puff themselves up, and make themselves "bigger." You know, like Pete Hegseth. Jesus does just the opposite. (insecure posture vs. secure and confident)

Then, when people had dispersed, he speaks words of compassion and reconciliation to the woman: no one has condemned you; I don't condemn you. Go in peace—in wholeness.

Notice what Jesus *didn't* do in that situation: Jesus didn't speak his brilliant one-liner and then say to them, "Gotcha! Haha! Now you've learned a lesson, you judgmental hypocrites!" He didn't lecture them. That would've not only caused them to forget the wise words they just heard, it would've magnified the conflict because that kind of response creates a contest, a win-lose situation, and in win-lose situations, much of the time, *everyone* loses.

No, Jesus simply releases his words out into the atmosphere and lets them land where they will, to do what they will do. And focuses his compassion on the person who needed it.

The apostle Paul says (from the Rom.12 reading), "If it is possible, *as far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with everyone." In other words, just make an

effort. It doesn't have to be perfect; it doesn't have to solve everything; we simply do our part to put as much wellbeing and harmony out there as we can.

We don't have to change the whole world all at once. But each of us *can* do something to bring peace to the world where we are.

Here is a reminder of a great encouragement from Mother Teresa. This was found written on the wall of one of her children's homes in Calcutta:

People are often unreasonable, irrational and self-centered; love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you; be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight; create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous; be happy anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten; do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it may never be enough; give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.

As you've heard me say before, sometimes we are called to just do the next right thing, right in front of us. And trust God for outcomes. And live in the Kingdom, because "The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

We Wait the Peaceful Kingdom