

HOW TO BE A PEACEMAKER WHEN THEY NEVER STOP FIGHTING
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 10, 2016
Based on 1 Samuel 25, Micah 4:1-4, Matthew 5:9

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, "Bless you," during which we are focusing on what it means to live in the blessing of God. One of the best places to look for guidance on that theme is the Beatitudes, a set of eight "blessed are" sayings of Jesus. We have considered a few of the Beatitudes previously in this sermon series, and today we are considering one of the most important and currently relevant of the Beatitudes, where Jesus said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9) Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The word "peace" appears nearly four hundred times in the Bible; in the New Testament, the word appears in every book. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, it is the word "shalom"; in the New Testament Greek, the word for "peace" is *eirene* (from which we get the word "irenic", indicating something that is conducive to peace). Sometimes people think of peace as the absence of war, but the Biblical concept of peace is much deeper and much more comprehensive. The word "shalom" indicates a condition of wholeness and serenity, a state of affairs where people are in harmony with God and in harmony with one another. The image in that passage that we heard from Micah -- where people after beating their swords into plowshares are all "sitting under their vines and their fig trees" (Micah 4:4) -- is a classic Old Testament image of shalom, for it portrays not only an absence of fighting but also a situation of social well-being, where people are living in a community where they enjoy freedom and tranquility and where all live in dignity, with basic needs met.

This means that real peace is not necessarily a continuation of the status quo. When the people of Israel were laboring as slaves in Egypt, the Pharaoh wanted "peace" and quiet from all those Hebrew slaves, but God's plan for peace called for some real upsetting of the Pharaoh's apple cart (or, literally, an upsetting of the Pharaoh's chariots!). To pursue peace does not mean that we are to just quietly accept the world as it is. To pursue peace in the Biblical sense means that we take action, like Moses, to work against political tyranny and economic and social injustice, to address those wrongs in societies that are at the root of so much pain and turmoil and division among people. This is why in the United Methodist Church we often talk about "peace with justice" -- because we recognize that real peace is created only when we create a world in which all people can live in dignity and well-being.

So it is that sometimes the Prince of Peace becomes a "disturber of the peace" -- such as when Jesus threw out the moneychangers from the temple, because they were exploiting the poor. Jesus in his life exemplified the Biblical ideal of peacemaking -- that peacemaking does not mean a quietist approach, where one just acquiesces in the face of present conditions. Peacemaking means working for God's ideal of peace -- where people are free from oppression and exploitation and terror and strife, and all are able to live in genuine harmony and well-being.

So how do we achieve this kind of peace in the world? In the 1870's in America, Samuel Colt came out with a huge handgun called "The Peacemaker." I'm not sure that this is what Jesus had in mind in the Beatitudes; but the story of the Peacemaker six-shooter serves to illustrate one of the key areas of debate that Christians have had when thinking over the centuries about how to make peace. The "Peacemaker" revolver became very popular among sheriffs in the Wild West, where outlaws were destroying the peace, and where the use of force seemed the only way to finally bring peace to Western towns. Colt manufactured a whole series of Peacemaker pistols; some of them of course also got into the hands of the outlaws. We continue to wrestle today with issues relating to the proper use of force and how to keep weapons on the right side of the law.

In the church we recognize that there are times when we have to use force in order to stop evildoers, while at the same time it is clear that force does not create peace. The use of force might stop immediate violence – in Dallas, a robot with a bomb put an end to the mayhem of that Dallas shooter – but we know that real and lasting peace will involve more than stopping the bullets flying. Real peace requires the creation of shalom – that condition of wholeness and harmony and well-being.

So how do we arrive at genuine peace? This is a central question not only for our nation and our world at large but also for many of our relationships in life. The story is told of two little brothers who got into a huge fight and were still fuming at each other when they went to bed. As the mother put one of the boys to bed, she said his regular nightly prayer with him – Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take – and then she said, "All right, now before you go to sleep, you have to forgive your brother." The boy thought, for a while, and then said, "O.K. I'll forgive him. But if I don't die tonight, he'd better look out in the morning."

It can be hard to create lasting peace, and we may find ourselves in a variety of circumstances where we are struggling to serve as peacemakers in the midst of apparently unending conflict. You may be striving to be a peacemaker in your household, or in your extended family, or in your neighborhood, or at work, or at school, or in a volunteer organization. You may be on the edge of the conflict, or in the midst of it. Then when you read the news, it appears that the whole world is in the grip of endlessly raging conflicts. How can you be a peacemaker when it seems that people never stop fighting? The central answer is to look to Jesus Christ.

The message of the New Testament in this regard is clear: peace is something that arises through the working of Christ within us. "My peace I give to you," [John 14:27] said Jesus, or later when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples he greeted them by saying, "Peace be with you." [Luke 24:36, John 20:19]. We cannot begin to create peace among others until we are at peace within ourselves, but we can never find that peace on our own, which means that we can never create peace on our own. But we can find genuine peace in Jesus Christ, who brings forgiveness and healing of the soul and puts us right with God. As Paul said, "Christ is our peace" [Ephesians 2:14a]; and Paul went on to say that as Christ puts

us right with God he enables us finally to be reconciled with one another. "Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us," [Ephesians 2:14b] Paul wrote. "He has reconciled all of us to God in one body through the cross, thus putting hostility to an end."

In short, the movement toward peace is something that God creates by sending us Christ to bring us into harmony with God; and it is as we let the peace of Christ take hold within us that we then can begin to effectively work for peace in the world. The medieval spiritual leader Thomas a' Kempis put it well: "First keep the peace within yourself, then you can also bring peace to others." [from *The Imitation of Christ*, 15th century]

So peace begins with the spiritual peace that is possible through Jesus Christ. Here we see the central role of the church – we offer the world Christ, who brings the spiritual and moral foundation for a society that can live in peace.

Sometimes people experience the peace of Christ and then want to simply stop there, just basking in the peace of God. But Jesus did not say, "Blessed are those who are at peace." He said, "Blessed are those who make peace – blessed are the peacemakers." This is a call to action in the world.

There are several inspiring stories of peacemakers in the Bible. One of the most instructive is the story of Abigail, an often overlooked epic that comprises an entire long chapter in the book of first Samuel; we heard excerpts from that chapter this morning. Abigail witnessed a huge fight about to unfold between David, then a military commander and not yet king, and her husband, Nabal, who had insulted David and refused to help him when he had humbly asked for some assistance. David was on the march to take revenge, and there would have been a terrible bloodbath; but Abigail did not sit idly by. She took action and intercepted David with a generous gift of food for his men and apologies on behalf of her husband, plus some spiritual counsel, reminding David that he would not want to take an act of bloody vengeance that he would later regret. David was thankful for her intercession and turned away from a fight.

We likewise are called to act as peacemakers; and from the overall Biblical message about peacemaking, we can draw a basic picture of what real peacemaking looks like – what peacemakers, from a Biblical perspective, do.

Peacemakers, first of all, defend God's values rather than their own honor. How many conflicts begin because people feel disrespected and then lash out in defense of their own honor? This is exactly what was going on between David and Abigail's husband. But Abigail was concerned to preserve life, and so she approached David bowing to the ground and offering apology. She was focused on what God would want in this circumstance and was unconcerned about the honor of her household. Her graciousness defused the hostility. Jesus would later encourage his followers to be humble, and he himself was unconcerned about all the insults hurled his way and instead remained focused on the values of God's Kingdom.

A further key element in peacemaking is that peacemakers meet evil with good. David was coming with swords and very bad intent; Abigail met him with loads of good food.

Jesus would later say to turn the other cheek and love even our enemy, and Paul wrote, "Overcome evil with good." (Roman 12:21)

Finally, peacemakers work to build shalom, recognizing that it is not enough to stop hostility; we need to address the conditions that underlie turmoil and strive for communities in which people can live in wholeness. This is exactly what we do in our mission outreach as a church. We are at work locally, nationally, and around to the world to alleviate poverty and eliminate hunger and fight disease and raise education. We are at work to build communication and create understanding amidst different groups of people. On all different levels, we are striving to bring about a world of shalom.

Of course, it may seem at times that peacemaking is a lost cause – especially when we have a week like this past one, which featured violent conflict in the headlines day after day, from the Middle East to Dallas. But this is precisely why the church is so important. We are the instruments of God's peace, called not just to long for peace, but to create peace. As Mother Teresa once said, "Peace is not something you wish for; it is something you make, something you do."

So what can we do specifically in the aftermath of the Dallas shootings this week? We are responding today as a church in two concrete ways. First, along with other churches that are a part of the Kent Interfaith Alliance, we are promoting a vigil this afternoon at 5:00 at the Unitarian Universalist church. Secondly, we are holding visioning and planning meetings this morning -- at 10:15 in Pierson Hall or at 11:30 in the parlor, which will seek to shape some sort of further local action by our church. You are invited to come to either one of those meeting -- they will be facilitated by Sally Dean – and of course you are invited to that vigil this afternoon. Whatever we do, as a church and in our individual lives, we are seeking to actually live out the values of Jesus; as he said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."