

“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

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Colossians 3:12-17

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. **14** Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH

In 1944 Jill Jackson was in a bad place. She had just gone through a divorce, and she attempted to commit suicide.

Thankfully, she didn’t succeed, but in the darkness of that hour she found the light of God’s presence.

She wrote, “I had an eternal moment of truth, in which I knew I was loved, and I knew I was here for a purpose.”

Jill spent the years after that suicide attempt exploring her spiritual nature and her relationship with God. She discovered a love for writing and began writing songs with Sy Miller after they married in 1949.

In 1955 she wrote the lyrics for “Let There Be Peace on Earth” and her husband wrote the melody. The song was introduced at a California retreat to a group of young people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The young people loved the song, and introduced it in their own churches, schools and homes.

And before long it had been sung in all 50 states.

Indeed, the song became a favorite around the world.

This song has also become a favorite tradition in our own church.

The first Sunday after Christmas we join our voices with those around the world and sing,

“Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

That seems to fit this first Sunday after Christmas.

It reflects the message of the angels.

“Peace on earth.

Good will toward all.”

This peace is not just pie in the sky by and by.

This peace, as the song and Scripture teaches us, begins with you and me.

AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

In our lesson for today the apostle wrote to the Colossians,

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...”

Or, to translate that phrase more literally we might say, “Let the peace of Christ act as an umpire in your hearts.”

The NEB translates, “Let Christ’s peace be an arbitrator in your hearts.”

Peterson comes up with an image which suggests the discipline of a marching band. He translated this verse,

[15] Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing.... Colossians 3:15

I think the images suggested by these various translations. They give us insight into how God makes peace on earth a reality.

Peace on earth is not a romantic wish nor is it something that only the end of the world can bring about.

Peace on earth is a personal possibility as we let the peace of Christ be the umpire or arbitrator in our lives.

Peace on earth becomes a personal possibility when we start singing God's song instead of humming our own tune. Peace on earth is marching to the cadence of God's drumbeat.

Peace is not just something that we hope for.
Peace is something that can rule in our hearts.
We can have a down to earth experience of peace today.

We all know that to play a game of baseball we have to give the authority to call the game to an umpire.... otherwise the game would be utter confusion with dispute after dispute.

In order to settle labor/management disputes without strikes and confrontations that would be harmful to both the company and the union, quite often a third person, an arbitrator is given the authority to decide what would be a fair decision.

Those of us who have played in the marching band know that the key to a good band is discipline. We must all play the same tune and march in disciplined step in order to obtain our goals as a group.

In the same way, we relinquish control of our lives to the peace of Christ. We let Christ determine the rules.

We use the life of Christ as way to discover what God wants for our life. We entrust our conflicts and our questions to the peace of Christ.

THE PEACE THAT WAS MEANT TO BE

Last week we talked about how Mary, when confronted with the promise of the angel replied,

“How can this be? How can the Son of God become a part of this flesh and blood world?” It seemed impossible.

But, the angel reminded Mary that
“nothing will be impossible with God”.

Talking about peace in a world that is anything but peaceful seems like wishful thinking.

Like Mary we may want to ask,

“How can this be?

How can the peace of Christ rule in my heart?

It sounds impossible.”

But, our passage for today reminds us that this not impossible. Nothing will be impossible with God.

The song of peace has already been written by God in Christ, and we are invited to join the choir.

Peace on earth can begin with us because, as our lesson for today puts it, we are

“God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...”

Several weeks ago our lesson was from Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

In that letter Paul talked about the “peace of God that surpasses all understanding”.

In other words, peace begins from above.

Peace begins with God’s gracious choice.

God has chosen us.

But why? Why has God chosen us?

God has chosen us to be interments of his peace.

According to the Scripture, we are chosen because we are “holy and dearly loved.”(Colossians 3:12)

“Holy” doesn’t mean that we are somehow better than others. Holy means that we who are chosen by God to do a special job.

And that special job is to tell others in word and deed about the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

In that sense peace on earth really does begin with you and me.

Out of gratitude for God’s gracious choice we are challenged to live in a new way.

DRESSING FOR PEACE

According to Paul, it’s like putting on a new set of clothes.

That’s an image we should readily identify with at Christmas.

Invariably you’ll see someone looking good with a new shirt or dress, and you say,
“I bet I know what you got for Christmas.”

It makes us feel better to put on new clothes.
What’s that old saying? Clothes makes the man.
Who knows, maybe it makes the woman as well.

When those clothes we wear are a gift from a love one, it means even more when we wear them.

Each year my children send me pictures of the grandchildren proudly wearing the clothes that we bought them for Christmas.

It’s not just about nice clothes. It’s about what those clothes mean. Nana and Granddaddy love you, and they have given you this gift.

Well, in the same way, God loves us.
We are God’s children.
And God has given us a new suit of clothes to wear this Christmas.

The grace of God enables to take off the old clothes, the old way of life and put on the new clothes, the new way of life.

We are given a new suit of behaviors, a new way of acting based upon gratitude for what God has done for us.

Our Christmas outfit consists of “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Note that all of these are qualities that promote peace.

In Proverbs 15:1 we read that “a soft answer turns away wrath...”

Peace on earth really does begin with us.

We have the capacity to promote peace by the way we talk to each other.

On the other hand, harsh words can and often do lead to violence.

The second half of that verse from Proverbs reads, “...but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Of course, the question is how can we avoid speaking harshly?

Some might say that “speaking our mind” and not holding our feelings in is a good thing.

But, Christians believe that we are saved by grace, that we do not deserve the gift of God’s love and forgiveness. And therefore, we are encouraged to be gracious toward others.

Today’s passage gives us a picture of what grace looks like in action. We put on the clothes of grace. We put on “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

PRACTICING PEACE

And we put on those qualities by thinking about God’s unconditional love for us before we say something to someone else.

We think before we speak.

What a concept, right?
Thinking before we speak.

That's what Paul means when he advises the Colossians to:
"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..."
We become gracious people
by controlling what we say.

I think social media has the potential to do a great deal of good.
One positive post has the potential to encourage and inspire a lot of people.

On the other hand, the converse is also true.
One negative post has the potential to stir up anger and even conflict.

Paul's advice is even more relevant in our day and time when words travel farther and faster.

Now more than ever we need to,
as the Scripture puts it:
"clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Again, all of this begins with us.
"Let there be peace on earth
and let it begin with me."

The peace of Christ rules in our hearts.

From a physical standpoint, the heart is one of the most important organs in the body.
And it's wise for us to do whatever we can to promote a healthy heart.

We exercise.
We eat a healthy diet. And so forth.
Good health begins with a healthy heart.

And good spiritual health begins

by exercising our spiritual heart.

When it comes to our physical heart, it's not enough just to talk about exercising and eating a healthy diet. We actually have to put those concepts into practice.

And in the same way, it's not enough just to talk about the being kind or compassionate or patient.

We have to make those characteristics a part of our daily routine.

And when we do that our spiritual heart is strengthened just as our physical heart is strengthened by healthy living.

PEACE AND FORGIVENESS

I'm not fond of New Year's resolutions.

The reason is that those resolutions will probably be broken by January 2 ...if I even keep them that long!

This passage takes into account the fact that we will all fail despite the best of intentions.

We might try to put on the clothes of faith:

“compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

But, some days we'll have a bad hair day.

Some days we'll go out into the world half dressed.

Some days we'll speak a harsh word
and stir up anger.

But, when that happens we get a “do over”.

We call it forgiveness.

Paul wrote, “Bear with one another,
and if anyone has a complaint against another,
forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you...”

This coming year will not be perfect. In fact, it will be, like all other years, far from perfect.

But, if we look at the problems and disappointments of the coming year from the vantage point of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the rough spots will not seem so overwhelming.

If we are filled with joy and gratitude for what God has first done for us in Christ Jesus, we will be a joyful and forgiving people despite circumstances that are often less than ideal.

When a child has a temper fit, if you react in the same emotional tone, you will only increase the intensity of the emotion.

But, if you continue to press the issue in a firm but non-combative way.... eventually the child will calm down.

The same is true in any relationship. It takes two to make a fight, and this passage of Scripture seems to be saying,

"We can overcome our differences in a better way. Let's treat each other as mature Christians.... overlooking the petty squabbles.

Let us be willing to compromise and look at all sides of an issue. Let us press firmly but kindly toward the goals we think God wants us to pursue."

Peace on earth can be more than a slogan.
It can be a reality in our daily lives.
It really can begin with us.

PEACE AND WORSHIP

But, we are not strong enough to do it alone.
We must help each other along the way.

One of the ways we encourage each other is through worship.

According to Paul we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly.

We do this by helping each other understand God's word. Notice that this is not just the task of the minister.

This is a job given to each of us.

Paul said, "Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom..."

And he suggests that one of the best ways to let the word of Christ dwell richly in us is to sing the hymns of our faith.

Sometimes when I'm having trouble getting started with a sermon I turn to a hymn that proclaims the message for that Sunday. And quite often I get the inspiration I need.

There's something about putting God's word to music that makes it come alive.

One commentator asked,
"When we come before God in worship,
why do we sing rather than merely think or talk with one another?"

She answered her own question this way,

"Singing is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, greatest joys, and most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally."

Last week we talked about the fact that singing God's song can actually be a way of bringing light to a dark world.

Sometimes when we sing God's song,
peace breaks out.

PEACE BREAKS OUT

Several years ago I was watching the history channel around Christmas. And they told the story of something called the Christmas truce.

It was Christmas Eve 1914.
Opposing armies lay in their trenches,
the British and French on one side and the Germans on the other.

No doubt most of those young men didn't want to be there, and they especially didn't want to be there on Christmas Eve. They were missing their family and friends terribly.

And a young German soldier began to sing, "Silent night, holy night." Others joined in. When they had finished, the British and French responded with other Christmas carols.

Eventually, the men from both sides left their trenches and met in the middle.

They shook hands, exchanged gifts, and shared pictures of their families.

Informal soccer games began in what had been "no-man's-land."

And a joint service was held to bury the dead of both sides.

The generals, of course, were not pleased with these events. Men who have come to know each other's names and seen each other's families are much less likely to want to kill each other.

War seems to require a nameless, faceless enemy. They threatened to harshly discipline any soldier who was fraternizing with the enemy.

So, following that night when peace broke out, the men on both sides spent a few days simply firing aimlessly into the sky.

Then the war was back in earnest and continued for three more bloody years.

Yet the story of that Christmas Eve lingered - a night when the angels really did sing of peace on earth.

Could a war really come to halt because one soldier decided to sing Silent Night in the middle of a war zone?

It seems impossible and yet it's true.

It reminds us that nothing will be impossible with God.

I wonder. What might happen in our lives if we dared to sing a song of peace together?

"Let there be peace on earth
and let it begin with me."

Amen.