

## Another Piece of the Peace Puzzle

(2 Samuel 7: 1-14; Ephesians 2: 11-22; Psalm 89; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56)

Our Scripture lessons might be engaged in a little “Holy War” this morning. Three of the four are talking about peace—or *trying* to. The Epistle Lesson is speaking quite directly and authoritatively about peace; the Gospel lesson is *sort of* talking about peace, but you have to look carefully in order to see it; the lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures talks about peace for David’s offspring, but it’s a rather pointy and painful *counter*-example that’s bound to stick in our throats and even more often in our daily newspapers.

Let me lead into the topic with a little historical ammunition. The Society of International Law, in London England, states that during the last 4,000 years there have been only 268 years of peace. In just the past 300 years there have been no less than 286 wars on the continent of Europe alone. Since history has been recorded there have been about 8000 peace *treaties* negotiated and *signed*, but with only a *handful* of exceptions they have *all* been broken. This seems to suggest that the task of achieving peace has probably been the biggest and most persistent *puzzle* in human history. And if the sustainability of peace has been a puzzle in history generally, then in the Middle East, and I’m thinking especially of Syria and Gaza, it has been a particularly deadly and recurring puzzle.

Puzzles can be a challenge *or* a problem. Think of a jigsaw puzzle, a *giant* one with 10,000 pieces. That puzzle will be a nasty and infuriating problem if you discover, after a few evenings of work, that you don’t have *all the pieces*, won’t it? Sometimes it would be a very good idea to take inventory of the puzzle’s pieces *before* you start to work on it, wouldn’t it? But does anyone actually *do* that? Count the pieces before you start putting them together? Whether or not we can solve the age-old puzzle of peace this morning, I think we should at least take *inventory of the pieces* and we can use our Scripture lessons to gain a better view.

Just before we tighten the focus on that passage from the letter to the Ephesians, it may help to take a broader view of the Bible for a moment. Any guesses as to how *often* we hear the word “peace” in the biblical text? 100 times? 200? 400? Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance counts about 500 occurrences; if you include all synonyms and related concepts, you can easily bump *that* count to a *thousand*. There, I would suggest, is the first piece of the puzzle of peace. The Bible talks about peace *a lot*, and so should *we*.

In the New Testament, if you start with the letters of the earliest Christian writer, you will note that Paul manages to work the word “peace” into virtually every letter salutation and closing, every expression of thanks, every positive encouragement to young churches, every list of virtues for new Christians, every doxology and prayer that comes from his pen. If we can use Paul as an *example* of the Christian movement in the mid-first century, then it’s no wonder the Christians were first recognized by others in the Empire—by the Romans especially and by Jewish historians—as peace-lovers, peace-makers and no threat of *any* sort to the Empire or its business. And if we look back farther to Paul’s

Master, to his model and inspiration, just *try* counting all the references *Jesus* makes not only to the idea of peace but to the moral *action* and *attitudes* that give birth to peace. For example, think of when Jesus speaks of turning the other cheek when insulted or walking an extra mile when pressed into service; or when he speaks of forgiving those who have offended you and taking down the walls and barriers that others have put in your way. If we keep in mind that Jesus lived and worked in a country under military occupation, when the only things higher than the taxes were the *tempers*, and when nationalistic sensitivities were always near the boiling point, it's truly amazing how much attention and insight Jesus gave to the cause of peace.

Jesus had a particularly clear, strong and active interpretation of the idea of peace. In fact, if peace and love can be seen as two expressions of the same reality, and I think they should, then this was the central organizing principle of virtually every lesson he ever taught. But though creative in his application of the idea, Jesus was not exactly the author of this thinking. The fact is that he was born into a culture that had a deep and abiding reverence for the word "peace" — "shalom" in Hebrew. He was born into a culture that used the word on every stroll to the marketplace or synagogue, every time a door was opened. Now, I want to unpack at least a few of the meanings of the word "shalom" because these pieces of the puzzle are absolutely essential.

When "shalom" is used in greeting another person, and note that the word "salaam" in Arabic is nearly identical in sound and *is* identical in meaning, the word does not merely express a *wish* that the other person might have peace. To use that word in greeting is, first and foremost, your solemn oath that *you* come in peace. This is your word that you are offering peace, that you will *not betray* hospitality, that you can be *trusted*, that the other person can be *safe and secure* in your presence. Let me underline this heavily, because we are too often missing this very piece of the puzzle. To use the word "peace" as nothing more than a fond wish, to express it only as a vague hope is to miss the point completely. When we use the word "peace", we must give *our* word. It is *not* a mere wish, it's a sacred and solemn *oath*, and we put *ourselves* on the line in speaking it. Inhabitants of the Middle East and native speakers of Semitic languages know this about using the word "peace" as a greeting. They know the truth *about* peace, whether or not they back it with their word or their actions.

Here's something else about using "shalom" as a greeting, and this too I think is quite instructive. Though it can be used as both a greeting and a farewell, in common practice the shalom-*greeting* will usually be phrased in the form of a *question*. Instead of just saying the word "shalom", the phrase will be "mah shlomka", which expresses something like "how are you doing?" but *literally* it means "what is *your* peace?" Isn't that neat? It's very important, when peace is being discussed, to hear it in the form of a *question* and equally important to have it directed to you *personally*. Where *do* you find your peace? And wouldn't that be a helpful thing to tell another, especially one you care about and more so if that one is troubled? What's *your* peace? And what can I do to provide that peace for you?

In the Middle East from very ancient times, the expression and the declaration of peace was a vitally important thing. It wasn't just a polite greeting. Among *nomadic* people, not bound by a common law, any sense of safety among *strangers* required a *mutual promise* of peace right in the first greeting. There is another piece of the puzzle—that peace has everything to do with *community*, with people together, with people who can and will trust each other.

Now, finally, let's turn the microscope on our text. I want you to hear very clearly the three things that Paul says here about peace. I'll condense his comments a little, to keep them short and simple. He says first that *Christ himself* is our peace. Then he says that Christ has broken down the *dividing walls* of hostility. And then he says that Christ came for this very purpose, to bring peace not only to those who are *near* but *also* to those who are *far away*.

Paul explains to his new Christian friends about this kind of peace that *Christ himself* is the source. It's *in Christ, by faith* and in *his grace* that we get to reboot *our lives*, get a chance to start again and not miss what's most important. Christ is the *source* of our peace. Which is to say, peace is *not* something we humans *invent* or attain, or achieve or preserve on our own. This peace we crave more deeply than anything else in society, and that we plainly die without, is not our invention. *God gave it. Christ delivered it.*

Paul says, secondly, that Christ has broken down the *walls and barriers* to peace, and there is another vital piece of the puzzle. You see, the *opposite* of peace is not "war" but "*wall*". Human *barriers*, whether of concrete, attitudes or words. Big obstructive things that work against a sense of community, for example, like that huge wall the Israelis are currently building to keep Palestinians out of their neighbourhoods. The opposite of peace is not war but *wall*. That wall is causing resentment even bigger and thicker than there already was. That wall is causing a lot of people to miss a vitally important part of the peace puzzle.

I think an old football story could work here. It once happened that a professional football player, retired due to injuries, was hired by his old college team to scout and recruit new players. Before he made his first recruiting trip, he went to talk with the head coach, the same coach under whom he had played when he was there in college many years before. That head coach was a crusty old veteran, widely known and respected all across the country, especially by those who had played under his direction and temper. The younger man said to him, "Coach, I'm about to head out on my first recruiting trip, but before I go I want to be sure we're on the same page. Tell me, Coach, what kind of player do you want me to recruit?"

The crusty old coach leaned back in his chair. He looked the young coach straight in the eye and said: "Son, I've been at this job a long time and over the years I have noticed that there are several different kinds of players. For example," he said, "you'll find some players who get knocked down and they *stay* down. That's not the kind we want!" And he said, "You will find some players who get knocked down and they get right back up and get knocked down again and *then* they stay down. *That's* not the

kind we want!” Then the old coach said, “But you will also find some players who get knocked down and knocked down and knocked down, and every time they get knocked down, they get right back up!” At this point, the young coach got excited and he said, “*That’s* the kind of player we want, isn’t it, Coach?” “No way!” shouted the old coach. “We want the one who’s doing all that *knocking down!*”

That’s what Paul says about Jesus and all those walls and barriers Jesus encountered. Jesus spent his life, literally, knocking down walls. Anything that divides or discriminates between people or groups, any attitude that lets one group feel they’re better than another, anything that people use to gain advantage for themselves and to *disadvantage* others, be assured of this—Christ has already taken a swing at it and flattened it. It’s a little like when the Berlin Wall fell, only bigger and better. Peacemakers on the model of Jesus Christ, need to get out there and knock some walls flat.

The third thing Paul says about real peace is that Christ came to bring it and deliver it *personally* but not only to those who are *near*, which is to say, not just to those who think they *deserve* it, not just to those within our own cultural group or political persuasion or among our military allies. Christ came to bring peace, just as much to those who are *far away*, which I think will include those who may not be interested at the present moment, and those who are probably looking in a different direction, *and* those for whom it’s going to take a lot more than just wishing it to be the case.

We Christians need a new and far more *active definition* for the word “peace.” But more importantly than just defining it accurately, we had better get *doing* it, and doing it *right*. We better get busy knocking down our own walls, our own social and ethnic barriers *at home*, and our own stupid political and *bureaucratic* barriers to the victims and refugees of wars elsewhere in the world. We have no right wishing or praying for peace for *others elsewhere*, if we’re not actively receiving peace from Christ and putting it to work among those we *already encounter* in our own neighbourhood.

Mahatma Gandhi once said a very curious thing to a group of Christians. He said, “You Christians revere a document containing enough ‘spiritual dynamite’ to blow all human misconceptions to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat your document as though it were nothing more than a piece of good literature.”

We need to do something a little more active than merely reading our biblical document. We need to open it wide and let the good stuff *out*. We need to *do* what it says. We need to be examples of what it teaches and the proof of its principles. And that applies most particularly to the subject of peace.

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