

Witness of the Scripture

““These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

See powerpoint – Blessed be the word?

Last week we talked about Joy, defined as a delight in God for the sheer beauty and worth of who God is. Today we are going to focus on Peace. As a reminder, we have handouts in the foyer, and in our handout, pastor Timothy Keller defines Peace as a confidence and rest in the wisdom and control of God, rather than your own.

Today I would like to look at three types of peace, read the related scripture, and share about one specific spiritual practice that we can use to encourage peace in our lives.

The first type of peace, in no particular order, is External peace. Peace outside of ourselves. External peace is a lack of conflict with others, a peaceful relationship with individuals and as a country, lack of war and conflict. External peace is also a lack of conflict with other species and the environment.

A great example of making External peace can be found in the story of Abram and his nephew Lot found in Genesis 13. The two were traveling together, but their possessions were too great, and their herdsmen began bickering and fighting over grazing land. Abram came to Lot and said: “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are family. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left” (Genesis 13:8-9).

Instead of letting anger build up and shouting accusations, Abram calmly assessed the situation and made a suggestion, giving Lot the preference. His example shows that making peace might involve sacrifice of comfort and preference. We might have to

give up control to have peace. But God blessed the results of Abram's efforts at peace, and God changed Abram's name to Abraham who was blessed to be a blessing.

A Biblical example to avoid is the story of Joab. a strong example of a lack of external peace. He was the general of King David's army but became known for his ruthlessness and he went above and beyond the king's orders in very violent ways. Joab managed to viciously murder two other military leaders, as well as David's wayward son Absalom, all without approval from the king. In fact, David eventually gave instructions for Joab to be punished for his violence. (1 Kings 2:5-6) David told his son Solomon: "Moreover you know also what Joab did to me, and what he did to the two commanders of the armies of Israel, to Abner and Amasa, whom he killed. And he shed the blood of war in peacetime and put the blood of war on his belt that was around his waist, and on his sandals that were on his feet. Therefore do according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to the grave in peace". Joab's attitude seems to have been completely

opposite of peace. He clearly illustrates Jesus' words in Matthew 26:52, how those who "take the sword will perish by the sword".

External peace may be reaching out to your family and community, with peace values like tolerance and acceptance and being respectful for personal spaces and diversity.

Roman 12:18 tells us: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Seeking external peace with others as an Individual actually helps me identify my own fears and weaknesses. Once I see my own obstacles, I can take responsibility to move towards peace on my end.

On a church corporate level, Newberg First Presbyterian seeks external peace with our community by being a Matthew 25 church. What or who is a Matthew 25 church you ask?

Well, the website says – "Welcome to the Matthew 25 mission movement in the PCUSA, 1,214 congregations, including First Prez – we are listed, have embraced the vision. In addition, 96 mid

councils, and 69 groups have committed to helping our *affirming and inclusive* denomination become a more relevant presence worldwide.

The Matthew 25 invitation focuses on Matthew 25: 31-46, the parable of the sheep and goats in which Jesus makes clear, that what we do matters to God and how we treat others is important to God.” Let’s review that scripture ...

““But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’”

And so – a little moment for mission here - The Matthew 25 movement of the Presbyterian mission agency embraces one or more of these three focuses:

- 1. **Building congregational vitality** by challenging people and congregations to deepen their faith and get actively and joyfully engaged with their community and the world. For example, Our Newberg Peace Garden invites the community to share our resources. Sharing resources is the work of the church.
- 2. **Dismantling structural racism** by advocating and acting to break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression of people of color. As Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well, when we work to eradicate racism, we are doing the work of our church.
- 3. **Eradicating Systemic Poverty** by working to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate economic exploitation of people who are poor. Helping the poor is the work of the church.

Sharing resources, Helping the poor, dismantling racism – none of that is political. Loving the poor, helping our neighbor regardless of skin color, and being generous are all examples of following Christ’s teachings. When we welcome others, we welcome Christ; when we bring together people who are divided, we are doing God’s reconciling work. We are called to serve Jesus by contributing to the well-being of the most vulnerable in all societies – rural and urban, small and large, young and not-so-young. From affordable housing to community gardens to equitable educational and employment opportunities to healing from addiction and mental illness to enacting policy change – there is not just one way to be a part of the Matthew 25 movement, there are many ways, but all are committed to Jesus, who is calling us to perform ordinary acts of compassion in daily life. In so doing, we continue Christ’s work of proclaiming release to captives and good news to the poor — the good news of God’s righteousness, justice and peace for all.

In addition to external peace, we also seek Internal Peace. Inner peace is a stillness we can find inside when the people around us push our buttons. It allows us to rest in the fact that we cannot change the words or actions of someone else. We are given courage through this internal peace to change what is our responsibility to change, and to foster external peace with others, and then we leave the rest up to God. Achieving this peace often requires the challenging work of forgiveness.

Internal peace also requires the quieting of our inner critic. It means not talking to ourselves in a way we would never talk to another person. We are going to look at this more when we get the fruit of Goodness, but inner peace requires us to stop telling ourselves we are not good enough.

Internal peace may require living just in the moment. Not thinking about the past or the future, but simply bringing to mind the blessings of the present. This seems comes easier for very young children and also for animals, probably because they are not too concerned with the past and the future. The main idea

of mindfulness is an awareness of the present moment, and it is amplified to Christians by the idea of awareness of God's presence. At the beginning of our service every Sunday, we remember that God is here in this house of prayer. That Statement is simply a mindfulness practice, so we are aware of God's presence. We have been practicing mindfulness in church for centuries, it's called silent prayer, contemplative prayer, but Western culture tends to place more importance on the mind over the body, with an emphasis of thoughts of God, instead of a focus on physical being. But is it possible that focusing on our breathing or posture, like we do in Yoga, might actually free our minds? In his book, "Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality", Tim Stead writes "The Western tradition also has a history of negative attitudes toward the body as well as the mindfulness material in general. I remember as a kid, the early 70's when TM, transcendental meditation became very popular in the US, picking up a feeling that meditation was all a little wacko....We have intrinsically picked up that the body and its desires are a problem, that they lure us away from the purity and superiority of the mind. But God

made us mind and body; furthermore, having made us in this way, God declared us 'good'. Mindfulness through physical practices of yoga, labyrinth walking, and other practices gives great respect and attention to the body, seeing the mind–body as a unity.”

We are supposed to, as Christians, have the key to being peaceful even in the most traumatic situations. Coming across as flustered, angry, or deflated may be seen by some as a sign of lack of faith or that our faith doesn't work very well.

A psychic on a game show should always win because they know all the answers, right? So, in the same way, don't Christians know that everything is going to be all right because God is looking after us? Don't we have Christ within us who is the Prince of Peace? But this is often not my experience.....and while this has probably never happened to you, I have gotten flustered, angry, upset, afraid, anxious, irritated, and shown 'inappropriate' behavior – all have been part of my experience at one time or another, yet, I have faith in Christ. The particular difficulty for Christians is that because we know we are supposed to be able to

remain calm we are tempted to act that way on the outside while we are feeling anything but peaceful within. I have read that a ship in 40 foot seas is tossed about like a toy, but the trick is to remember that 100 feet under the sea, it is calm and quiet. That imagery can be helpful as a mindfulness practice, but in reality, we don't live 100 feet under where it is calm. I am in the midst of the storm. My point is that sometimes, by avoiding any conflict, wanting the problem to just go away, to just "get through it"..... we can end up, if we are not careful, repressing the turmoil rather than dealing with it, and that can cause even more problems. The conflict never gets resolved, the problem never gets solved, and the pressure builds. Humans are not built to withstand increasing pressure without release. So, my starting point would be to suggest that, as Christians, we need to learn how to communicate our conflicts in a healthy way, not just pretend we don't have conflicts or just sweep them under the rug. If circumstances throw us into turmoil, then maybe we just need to admit to this. And when conflicts inevitably occur, and they are gonna happen folks...let's give others and ourselves, some grace. I

would like to suggest that honesty and integrity, are greater attributes than the ability to remain calm in all circumstances. Christians experience the same pressures as everyone else, so maybe the peace comes in giving grace to those we disagree with and giving grace to ourselves when we lose our cool.

A number of very powerful and moving stories in the Gospels illustrate that peace in the midst of the storm is something that we can experience in Christ. In Christ, not on our own. In the story of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4, there seems to be two important contrasting parts to this story. The first describes how Jesus seems to be so calm in the midst of this particular storm that it doesn't even disturb his sleep. In the second part, he recognizes that the disciples are being overwhelmed not just with water but with panic, and he calms the storm. The first part is about being peaceful despite the circumstances, and the second is about bringing peace by changing the circumstances. To quote my old friend and pastor Ed Nichols, God will either change our outlook or change the circumstances. Which of these to expect or to pray

for will depend on our situation, but what is clear is that the circumstances cannot always be changed. Indeed, the most important narrative in the Gospels involves adverse circumstances that cannot be changed – certainly not if Jesus is going to fulfill his calling on the cross. When faced with the most appalling fear from within, the abandonment of his friends, silence from his Father, and the real-life horror of crucifixion, Jesus is shown to remain calm, quiet, and entirely dignified. He clearly knew the terror of it all, as any human would, as depicted in the graphic scene in Gethsemane. But even here was a sense that somewhere, somehow, he knew a deeper peace, which held him through the turmoil of his awful experience that night. Can just anyone know this kind of peace? Or is it, let's be honest, just for those who have a certain type of personality or who were brought up in a particular way? Or maybe, just for Jesus? Well, it would seem that some people do have a head start in all this, they just naturally have a peaceful demeanor, but as one who is definitely not like that, I do feel that mindfulness has helped me grow in this area. Just taking a second to purposely ground myself

in the reality that I am safe, saying a prayer of trust, or giving thanks, has calmed me in difficult situations.

It is not really the absence of difficulties that bring peace, it's our trust in God and Jesus in the midst of storms that reveals the true nature of peace.

As Christians, we also have the third type of peace – the ultimate eternal peace of knowing we spend eternity in heaven with God and Jesus. Jesus made that possible. Do we fully take advantage of that truth? When we do, we realize that we simply cannot have the same perspective on earthly peace as an eternal and sovereign God has. When we know we have an eternity, do we ask ourselves if the issue disturbing our peace today, really going to matter in a few hundred thousand gazillion years? God is more than able. We can find peace in turning our lives over to the One that we can trust.

Let us pray,
Creator God,
we gather in wonder this day,
astonished by the complexity of all you have made,
acknowledging how small each of us is
in the midst of your world.
Yet your love gives us significance.
When we are overcome by forces beyond our control,
you speak words of peace.
When trouble or sorrow sets in,
You give us strength to persevere.
Source, Savior and Spirit of life,
we offer you praise and honor, love and loyalty,
with our lips and with our lives, now and
always. Amen.