

The path of peace

Luke 1:67-79

December 4, 2011

The peace of Christ be with you all ...

Some churches have a time in the worship service they call the passing of the peace. Worshippers turn to each other and offer the peace of Christ to each other. Let's do that now! Turn to your neighbor, call your neighbor by name, and say "Miah, the peace of Christ be with you."

What have we done? What is the meaning of the blessing we have offered to each other? It is this ...

*Our God is merciful and tender.
Our God will cause the bright dawn of salvation
to rise on us
and to shine from heaven on all those who
live in the dark shadow of death,
to guide our steps into the path of peace.*

To guide our steps into the path of peace. Peace is a path. Peace is a way. When we say, "The peace of Christ be with you," we are saying "May the way that is Christ's way, the way of peace, be your way." We are saying, "May you be in that way" ... "May you be on that way" ... "May you be going that way, with Christ," which, if you are, means, of course, that Christ is going that way with you! Peace is something we may have, but more than that peace is a path. Peace is a way we may take. Peace is a way we may live.

A couple of months ago, I had Wayne put this message on our marquee sign:

Peace is not a destination. Peace is the way.

One day peace will be our destination. We do indeed live in expectation of and for the sake of the day when God will bring shalom to all of creation. But, in the meanwhile, in this world as it is, in the midst of the muddle and the struggle of our lives as they are, peace is a way. Peace is a path.

Peace is not something that gets dropped into our laps while we are sitting still. Peace is something we experience in motion, as we take steps along the path into which Christ guides us.

Peace is not passive, a feeling that soothes us as we sit quiet and alone and apart. Peace is active, a way of being that is embodied in us as we negotiate the noisy and messy reality in which we live.

Peace is a path. Peace is Christ's path.

Then what is Christ's path? What is the path of peace?

The path of peace is confidence. Jesus knows he is loved by God. Jesus enjoys a deeply intimate relationship with God. Jesus relies on the power and wisdom of the word of God that fills his mind and strengthens his heart and guides his will.

Jesus ventures into the world with confidence -- confidence in God's presence, confidence in God's help, confidence in God's guidance -- and that confidence is the basis of the way of peace, because if God is with you and for you, what can prevail against you?

Jesus embodies peace, Jesus brings peace with him wherever he goes, because he is entirely unthreatened. Can you imagine Jesus threatened? Can you imagine Jesus afraid? Afraid of whom? Jesus was sometimes heartbroken. Jesus was sometimes frustrated. Jesus was sometimes angry, but Jesus was never afraid.

That's where the path of peace begins: leaving fear behind with utter confidence in the love of God, and if you want to follow the path of peace, that is where you must begin.

The path of peace is compassion. Jesus saw the wounds of the people around him, their wounded bodies, their wounded spirits. He was moved by their suffering. He was moved by their indignity. He was moved by their helplessness in the face of all that oppressed them, in the face of all that dehumanized them. And he took action, not merely comforting, but healing, not merely consoling, but defying oppression in all its shapes and disguises.

That's where the path of peace leads: to places and to people where there is no peace, and if you want to follow the path of peace, that is where you must go.

The path of peace is courage. Jesus went to Jerusalem when everybody was telling him to stay away, when everybody was telling him to remain out in the countryside where it was safe. He went where God called him to go. He did what God called him to do, even when it was risky, even when it meant sacrifice. Jesus Christ made peace, at the cost of his own life.

Following the path of peace requires courage and commitment, because there is a price to be paid, and if you want to follow the path of peace, you must be ready to take the risk and pay the price.

The path of peace is mercy. Our God is merciful and tender, and Jesus walked the path of obedience, the path of peace, by being merciful and tender. He would not break off a bent reed or snuff out a flickering candle. He would not humiliate a person bent in shame or write off a person weak in spirit. He brought peace by forgiving unforgivable sins, by crossing uncrossed boundaries, by welcoming unwelcome guests, by accepting unacceptable people, by offering mercy instead of condemnation.

The path of peace is the path of mercy, and if you want to follow the path of peace, you must be merciful, just as your Father in heaven is merciful.

Peace is a path. Peace is the path that Jesus chooses to take, and the path we too may choose to take with him ... or not.

When you are being bullied, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When you have been betrayed, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When you must deal with a colleague or a neighbor who sees things very much differently than you see things, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When you hear news of people homeless and hungry in Waterloo, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When you hear news of people homeless and hungry in Tanzania, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When you hear news of people denied equal justice, denied equal opportunity, denied equal dignity, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When someone comes to you asking you for help, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When someone comes to you asking you for forgiveness, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

When someone comes to you wanting nothing, only your friendship, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path.

In every moment, in every situation, in relation to every person who crosses your path, you may choose the path of peace, or you may choose another path. Peace is not a safe haven into which we retreat. Peace is something we embody, something we choose to embody, something we bring with us into every place we may go.

Maybe you know people who can ratchet up the tension level, just by walking into the room. Maybe it's them, or maybe it's you, but you know that one or the other or both of you have not brought peace with you.

I know people who do the opposite, people who walk into a room like a breath of fresh air. People who encourage me. People who invite me, even without words, to speak my mind. People who invite me, even without words, to share my hurts. People who calm my fear and ease my guilt and strengthen my faith and awaken my hope. People who bring peace -- to me, to whomever -- wherever they go.

May we be such people, you and I, people who bring peace wherever we go, people who walk in Christ's footsteps, people who walk in the path of peace.

When we say to each other, "The peace of Christ be with you," it is both a blessing and a prayer. It offers the blessing that is the gift of Christ's peace to us, the blessing that is the gift of peace that Christ is to us. But it is also a prayer, a prayer that we would put that gift to good use by walking the same path, the path of peace into which Christ guides us.

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