

Blessed Are the Peacemakers
Matthew 5:8-12
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This morning we come to Jesus' eighth Beatitude, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Would anyone deny that peace is sorely needed in our world? Daily our computer and television screens bring into our living rooms the horrors that are taking place in every corner of the globe: refugees streaming across Africa and the Middle East fleeing war-torn countries; gun violence erupting and destroying the day's peace in yet another workplace or school; abusive insults and incivility among public figures surpassing all bounds of common decency; domestic violence turning homes into places of fear and horror rather than sanctuaries of safety and love. Where, o where, is the peace? And, how are we going to get there from here, or is it even possible?

It is the Prince of Peace who is calling us to be peacemakers in the Sermon on the Mount. To be a lover of peace and a worker for peace is one of the distinguishing marks of those who are Jesus' disciples. By the miracle of grace and forgiveness we have been made at peace with God which causes us to regard our fellow human beings with compassion such that we want to promote their best interests even above our own. To be a peacemaker in the way of Jesus means we are lovers of harmony, promoters of unity, and healers of breaches. We delight to pour oil on troubled waters, to reconcile those who are estranged, to right wrongs and to strengthen the kind bonds of friendship. No wonder Jesus places this Beatitude at the end and the Apostle James says that we are to be "first pure, then peaceable." (James 3:17) We will never embrace the selflessness that peacemaking demands if we haven't first been remade into men and women who embody all the preceding Beatitudes.

Let us remember the context in which Jesus is speaking these words. He is announcing the inauguration of his kingdom, and it is entirely new and different from the kingdoms we are familiar with. It is utterly impossible for our old, unregenerate natures to live in God's kingdom. Only the new woman and new man can live this new way of life. Left to our own devices there will never be an end to the squabbles and conflict and wars that arise when we are each pursuing our own way.

So, what does it mean to be a peacemaker? Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that we can say two main things about peacemakers: passively, we can say that they are peaceable people, not quarrelsome or rude or divisive. They are, instead, approachable and caring. They are patient and long-suffering, because peace doesn't happen overnight. It takes diligence and perseverance. Then, actively, they are people who work proactively and intentionally to bring peace about. Peacemakers are not content to 'let sleeping dogs lie'; they're not concerned about maintaining the status quo. They seek out ways to produce and maintain peace. They work at it.

What does this involve in practical terms? First and foremost, as we've said, it necessitates having a new nature and Jesus has already told us what that new nature consists of: having a pure heart, desiring righteousness with God above all else, having a humble and meek spirit and all the rest. This new nature is critical because it is what frees us from self-interest and self-concern. If you want to be a peacemaker, you can't always be looking at everything in terms of how it affects you. If your #1 priority, whether it is consciously acknowledged or not, is to ask, "is this fair to me? Am I getting my rights and what is due me?", you can't simultaneously work for peace. It is this kind of self-concern that leads to quarrels, misunderstandings and disputes, and negates any peacemaking efforts.

Because here's the hard truth about peacemaking: peacemakers must be prepared to suffer, even to suffer wrong and injustice in order that peace may be produced. Peace is costly. There is no cheap peace any more than there is cheap grace. Remember what Jesus says: we are to forgive those who have wronged us not seven times but seventy times seven times which is a way of saying, there is no statute of limitations on forgiveness. But, it gets even harder than that. Certainly, if we are in the wrong we are to go straightaway to the one we have offended to repent and make it right. But, even if we are the one wronged rather than the one in the wrong, we are to humble ourselves and take the initiative. This is what actively working for peace asks us to do. We are more concerned with restoring the relationship than we are with who is right and who is wrong. Like I said, it is not cheap and it takes a new nature to be a peacemaker.

The sad truth is that the world talks a big game about peace but when it comes right down to it, people don't really want peace. E. Stanley Jones sums it up well when he says, "In a world where men love their chains and their clashes and think them a part of themselves, since they have been with them so long, anyone who disturbs them by loving [interference] will find the world kicking back in persecution. Men hate to be disturbed—even for the better. The peacemakers

must get used to the sight of their own blood. Woe unto you when all men speak well of you, said Jesus, for if they do then it proves that you have not disturbed [them] in the slightest.” (*The Christ of the Mount*, p. 77)

The peacemakers inevitably become the persecuted—Gandhi and Mandela go to jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. is shot and killed, and Christ goes to his cross. Yet, these peacemakers maintained an inner serenity even in the midst of persecution and in fact, it was their ability to speak authentically out of their own experience of inner strength and serenity in the midst of turmoil and disturbance that gave them the moral authority to call for peace.

And this highlights another way in which God’s kingdom operates completely differently than the kingdoms of this world. Those who practice the way of peace and who inevitably suffer for their efforts do not merely bear the pain of peacemaking, or escape the pain or submit to it—they use it. They rejoice and are exceedingly glad in spite of it.

In the natural self, pain is not necessarily redemptive. It can dull us, make us cynical and bitter, cause us to become resentful and mean-spirited. But, pain in the hands of the Prince of Peace can drive us deeper into the arms of God. For the peacemaker who has learned the secret of receiving and bearing pain by turning it over to God for God to use for his kingdom purposes and glory, nothing can harm him. He is completely safe. I love how Stanley Jones puts it: “He snatches the club from the hand of circumstances which would smash his head and turns it into a baton with which to lead the music that breaks forth from within.” Can you imagine your sufferings becoming the baton which leads the music? Christ can do that. Christ can transform hate into hallelujahs and misery into melody. That is the peace and reconciliation Jesus accomplishes on the cross.

This possibility of redemption throws open for us an utterly victorious way of life. It has been said that, “The Stoic bears, the Epicurean submits, the Christian alone exults.” That pain can be creative and even more, can contribute to our blessing and good is the power of the Gospel at work to redeem fallen humanity and to bring peace to all creation.

The key to this last Beatitude is in the first one. We overcome the suffering of life by anticipating it beforehand. In the first Beatitude we are called to die to self, as Paul puts it. We acknowledge our poverty of spirit and that all we are is a gift and a grace from the hand of God. When we have inwardly consented to die, to take up our crosses in order to follow Christ to his cross, the fear of death loses

its grip on us. Truly, there is nothing to fear because nothing can ultimately touch us. In life and in death we belong to God. We are at peace. We are loved, we are secure, we are held in God's embrace. Knowing these things, we can then forget about our dying and can think instead about how to live, how to really live.

This is the heart of the gospel paradox: in order to find our lives we must be willing to lose them. In order to live, we must die. True peace, true happiness is impossible any other way. But, we are so afraid. We experience the same visceral fear that gripped Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We are afraid that if we do it God's way, we will lose ourselves, when ironically, the exact opposite is true. When we do it our way, we are always a lesser version of ourselves than God created us to be. By trusting God, we are given complete and total freedom, and in that freedom we are most able to realize our best and most authentic selves. That's where true peace and happiness lies. And, it is from that place of being at peace with God and with ourselves that we then become powerful peacemakers for the kingdom of God.

Presbyterian mission coworker Doug Baker worked for decades in Northern Ireland helping bring about reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics. In a sermon entitled "Breaking the Cycle" he wrote: "The most important lesson I have learned from nearly 30 years in Northern Ireland is about the power of acceptance and forgiveness to break destructive cycles and allow new possibilities to come to life." In a separate sermon he wrote, "Let us remember today—the cross—and that it is in treating those who wrong us with the kindness of forgiveness, rather than vengeance, that we are most likely to move, to change their hearts and remove the hostility that led them to wronging us in the first place. Vengeance may break their spirit or crush their might, but vengeance has not the power to alter the enmity in a broken relationship."

Yes, the news looks bleak. But, we need to be reminded that there is much that happens behind the scenes that never makes our 24-hour news cycle. When I "googled" "stories of peace and forgiveness between Israelis and Palestinians," more than 21 million hits appeared. Listed on page after page were personal stories that could be read, book reviews of works that detailed stories of forgiveness and reconciliation, and organizations and movements that are working tirelessly to promote peace and unity in the Middle East, like Peace Now and the Bassam Aramin Forgiveness Project. Perhaps better known is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that were set up across South Africa at the end of apartheid. The cause of peace is hard, yes, but it is not impossible. And, of all people, the Church ought to be leading the way with hope and diligence

supporting peace initiatives however and wherever we can. And, sometimes, our support for peace needs to start in our own families.

We who were once far off have been reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus Christ who is our peace. Thanks be to God!