

Making Peace

Part 5 of Sermon Series: *No Longer Strangers*

a sermon based on

Ephesians 4:25—5:2

and delivered on

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“Then (they) began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that comes down from heaven.’” (Jn 6:41) To which “Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves, No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father.’” (Jn 6:43)

Although I’m preaching from the Ephesians text today, this interaction with Jesus is interesting. Whenever John writes, “the Jews,” he’s not talking about the Jewish people. John was Jewish, Peter was Jewish, Paul was Jewish – all the apostles were Jewish. Jesus – What did Pilate have written on that sign above his head on the cross? – “The King of the Jews.” When John writes, “Then the Jews began to complain...” He’s referring to the Jewish leaders in Judah. He’s referring to those men who want to take Jesus down because he is a threat to their worldly power and they can’t imagine any situation where Jesus’ success will benefit them and not just hurt their status.

That’s how it is in so much conflict. Isn’t it. The early church had conflict. There in Ephesus people probably recounted the glory days when Ephesus was THE main trade route between west and east. But as happens for many communities – the railroad came (or went), the highway came (or went when the interstate was built) – travel along the old Route 66 some day. There are still a lot of attractions to see, but a lot more faded glory than anything else.

That’s sort of what Ephesus would have been like. It may have been years, but they had that sense of themselves as the place to be. But there was a disconnect, so people had that edge about them. It must be someone’s fault. Everything that wasn’t going my way has to be someone’s fault and if it isn’t going my way, then whose fault is it? It can’t just be circumstance. {sarcasm}

That’s what people are like. Let’s face it, that’s even what Christians are like. Why do we think Paul told the church to “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice”? Why do we think that Paul said, “(B)e kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”? Unless they needed to be told these things, because they were holding on to bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, unless they weren’t being kind and tenderhearted and forgiving, he would have had no need. Paul had a tendency to commend people for doing what is right – he didn’t waste ink on hypotheticals. This was a real struggle in the church. It’s a real struggle for each of us always in our nation, our community, our church and our personal relationships. We lose sense of one another’s humanity because we ourselves feel a loss and a need to point blame.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt. 5:9) But what is a peace maker? It’s not a peace keeper. Really think about that. What do peace keepers look like? They look like soldiers. Don’t they? Do you know why? Because they are soldiers. They carry guns and are ready to put down any action that disrupts the peace. But this only works when our definition of peace is limited to an absence of open conflict and aggression.

The biblical concept of peace is more than that. Shalom is more than that. When Jesus speaks of peace, he’s talking about new sort of relationship where my success doesn’t rely on your failure. He’s talking about a relationship where my sense of justice doesn’t depend on another’s punishment or loss for their infraction.

Jesus offers us a new way. Think about those parts of the story we sort of pass over quickly. Do you remember who it was that buried Jesus? Joseph of Arimathea whom Luke describes as “a good and righteous man” who “although a member of the council (That is the Jews to whom

John refers – the leaders) although a member of the council had not agreed to their plan and action” (Lk 23:30-31) – that’s the man who tended to Jesus’ body along with Nicodemus (another member of the council).

What the others on that council didn’t realize is that Jesus wasn’t there to bring them down, but to lift everyone else up. What the others on that council didn’t realize is that Jesus wanted them to resist the temptation to fight among themselves. He wanted them to resist the temptation to think keeping the Jewish people in their place was the way to attain their own glory.

Those divisions breed anger and contempt. And so Paul invites us here in this passage to put aside those things that would divide us so that we can be imitators of God.

Paul is witness to Jesus’ invitation for each of us to be children of God. And who did Jesus say would be called children of God? The blessed peace makers.

Peace makers are those who step out of their own anger and offense. Peace makers realize that my success doesn’t depend on your failure. Peace makers realize that my justice doesn’t depend on your punishment or misfortune. Peace makers work to claim what is right not only for ourselves – but for everyone around us. That sounds like weakness. That sounds like compromise. But it really isn’t.

Satan’s main purpose is to make humankind God’s enemy – to turn us against him. He did it in the garden. He comes right out and says so in Job. But Job – though he wavers – refuses his bait – he sees no good in cursing God for what would that bring him.

What good is it if my enemy suffers? It doesn’t heal me? What good is it if I get all that I can but have to worry about the unfortunate starving soul across the street – on the other side of town – or the other side of the world who would fight me for what he needs to survive and take care of his family.

So Jesus offers us this better way. He doesn’t invite us to be saps. Instead we’re invited to be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving to one another. When we begin with those closest to us our circle of influence expands. In fact it’s the only way to really claim Jesus’ forgiveness for us.

We just said “The Lord’s Prayer” a few minutes ago. How does that go... “Forgive us our trespasses as (that is in the same manner as) we forgive those who trespass against us.” Sometimes I wonder what I just asked for – and I don’t like it. But even then Jesus doesn’t give up and transforms my prayer so that I might be a child of God called to make peace in my family, in my church, and in my community – and to live as one who knows him and through whom others can see the possibilities of real peace – between people – between peoples – and between people and our God. AMEN