

Making Peace  
Joshua 5:13 – 15; Ephesians 2:11 – 22  
Sunday, November 11, 2018

Friends, I stand before you today with *good news*: the *end* is here! The day is at hand! The time we have all been anticipating for so long has finally come! As Paul writes to the Romans, creation has been waiting with eager longing to be set free – *groaning* for the day of redemption – and now that day is finally here. Election season is *over*. No more campaign signs covering up our green spaces. No more vicious, negative commercials that I am afraid to let my children hear. No more automated phone calls. No more text messages. No more of those oversized postcards in the mail (we were getting three or four of those a *day* for the past month). It is finished. We are *free*. (At least until, what, June when it all starts up again?)

Watching all of this over the past few months, and watching the results come in on Tuesday night, made tangible just how *divided* we are as a country. Add to that the shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh the other week. It's like half of the country *hates* the other half; thinks they're stupid or crazy and dangerous and wrong and *evil*. It's like we have lost our ability to have meaningful public discourse without vilifying each other. And as I have been taking all of this in, especially over the past week, it reminded me of this story about Joshua. Chances are, this is a story that most of us haven't heard, because it's three obscure verses in a book of the Bible that most of us don't pay a lot of attention to. But I want you to look at what's going on here.

The people of Israel have left slavery in Egypt. They have wandered through the wilderness for 40 years before finally entering into the land that God has promised to them. Moses led them, but now he has died, and Joshua has taken over. Along the way they have fought battles with the various tribes that were living in the lands that they came into. So it has been battle after battle,

constant conflict with the people around them. And *this* story takes place just as they are preparing to attack and conquer the city of Jericho. Joshua is getting ready to lead the people of Israel into battle, when he looks up and sees a man standing before him with a sword in his hand. He asks the man, “Are you one of *us*, or one of our *adversaries*?”

Because when all you’re doing is fighting battles, every stranger is a potential enemy.

Joshua says, “Are you one of *us* or one of *them*,” to which the man replies, “Neither.” Well, you’re either *with* us or *against* us, right? That’s the way the world works. If you’re not one of *us*, and you’re not one of *them*, then *who are you*? The man says, “I am a commander of the army of the Lord.” Joshua falls down on his face and says, “What do you command your servant, Lord? What do you want me to do?” And he says to Joshua, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy.”

God does not get drawn into the tribalism of *us* and *them*. Instead, the messenger of the Lord stands between opposing factions and reminds them that they are in the presence of God.

We live in a world where we are constantly pushed to choose which side we are on. “Are you *conservative* or *liberal*? Are you one of *us* or one of *them*?” The defining point of our culture has become what *tribe* you are a part of. And when we come to view one another as nothing but members of opposing factions, every encounter becomes a battle that must be won. But what if – as individuals and as the church of Jesus Christ – when the world asks us, “Which side are you on? Are you one of *us* or are you one of *them*,” we said, “Neither,” and instead stand between opposing factions and remind them that they are in the presence of God?

That doesn't mean we don't *stand* for anything, because followers of Jesus are *always* called to stand for *justice* over *injustice*. It just means that, *as* followers of Jesus, we don't buy into this false cultural dichotomy of *us* and *them*. That we are *all* called to live life together, and so *our* place is not on the *right* or on the *left*, but *in between* them, drawing them back together, calling *all* people to live their lives in the presence of God.

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This is like what Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians. When the church first started out, there were these factions of *us* and *them*; that to be a Christian, you had to be Jewish, because if you were *not* Jewish you were a *Gentile*, and Gentiles were *outside* the blessing and favor of God. So these Ephesians would have been *outsiders*, because they were not Jewish, they were *Greek*; they were *Gentiles*.

But what the church started to discern was that maybe God was at work among the *Gentiles*, too. So they could become Christians, they just had to become Jewish *first* (they had to be circumcised and follow Jewish law). Then they started to discern that maybe they *didn't* need to do all of that. Maybe God loved them and accepted them *just the way they were*. So the *us* and *them* became *us*. And Paul writes to the Ephesians, "You Gentiles, who at one time were *outsiders*, without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to God's covenant, and having no hope; you who were once *far off* have been *brought near* by the blood of Jesus Christ. For *he* is our peace. He has made both groups into *one*, and has broken down the dividing wall, the *hostility* between us. He has made one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and reconciling both groups to God in *one body*."

Paul says that Christ came and proclaimed peace "to you who were far off," and Christ proclaimed peace "to you who were near." So we "are no longer strangers and aliens, but

citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” We are part of *one kingdom, one family* in Christ. In him, Paul says, “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

So it’s not just reminding the world that *we* are in the presence of *God*. It’s also reminding the world that the presence of *God* is in *us*. When we look at each other, we cannot see strangers and aliens, us and them, conservative and liberal, insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies. When we look at one another – even that person with whom you most vehemently disagree – we are called to see Christ. Not to define ourselves by the politics of red and blue, because *our* red is the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for *all* people, and blue is the color of royalty, because we are citizens of the kingdom of God, serving Jesus Christ the King of Kings.

What would it look like today for Christ to take those who are far away – outsiders, aliens, strangers – and bring them near (to each other and to God).

What would it look like today for Christ to break down the dividing wall, the hostility that is between us, and make *both* groups into *one*?

What would it look like today for Christ to proclaim peace to those who are far off and those who are near; to *make* peace, creating one new humanity in place of the two, reconciling all people to God and to each other?

What would it look like today for Christ to take strangers and aliens and turn them into citizens of the kingdom of God and members of the household of God?

What would it look like today for Christ to join all people together in a way that builds a holy temple where God can dwell?

And what would it look like for us, as Christ's followers and his church, to allow Christ to do all of that *through us*?

Two weeks ago – the day after the shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh – we talked at the beginning of worship about how St. John's has always been intentional about never identifying as a conservative or liberal church. That has not always been *easy* or *popular*, but we feel called by God to be a church where *all people* can come together and share in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. That we exist to show the world that it *is* possible for conservatives and liberals, black, white, Asian, Latino, Arabic – it is possible for *all of us* to love one another and live life together as one. We are here to bear witness to the world of the *life* and the *love* that is possible in Christ and to give them a *glimpse* of what the kingdom of God looks like.

Author Rachel Held Evans writes that “church is a good place to practice being with people with whom you disagree, which is to say, a good place to practice being human.” But to *do* that, we cannot allow our *politics* to shape our *faith*. We have to let our *faith*, the teachings of Jesus Christ, shape our politics and how we live life together.

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Today is not just Veterans' Day. It is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armistice Day, which marked the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front of World War I, and ultimately, the end of that war. For decades this day was observed as a reminder of the horrors of war and a calling to work for peace so that the world would never again have to suffer such a great war. But then came World

War II, conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, and many others since. And this day shifted from an observance of *peace* to honoring veterans of *all* wars. And while that is *good* and *important*, there is something about the original intent of this day that we need to reclaim. Because the best way to honor veterans is first by taking care of the ones we have already *made*, so that *they* can receive whatever healing they need (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) to live the rest of their lives in peace; and second, by working to make sure there do not have to *be* any more veterans because we have realized the vision that God gave to Isaiah and Micah, where “they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” As Christ’s followers and his church, we are called to be peacemakers; to actively work to bring about peace in this world, whether it is peace *within* or *without*. We are called to help people make peace with *God* and with *themselves*. And we are called in this warring world to stand in the midst of opposing factions and remind them that they are in the presence of God and to help them *see* God’s presence in one another.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote:

“If there is to be peace in the world,  
there must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
there must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
there must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors,  
there must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
there must be peace in the heart.”

That will not just happen by itself. It takes people willing to *work* for it. Christ calls *us* to *be* those people. So how will *you* make peace?