

Peace-ing Together, Piece by Piece

Sermon for Massanetta Sunday Preached by Rev. Ridgley Beckett (with content provided by the Middle School conference at Massanetta Camp and Conference Center)

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Last week Christa Fisher and I had the pleasure of joining 6 middlers (shorthand for “Middle Schooler”) from St. John’s and Covenant Presbyterian churches to a place called “Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center” nestled in the hills of the Shenandoah valley outside of Harrisonburg, VA. The mountain springs still run ice cold under those hills and the hotel lobby still has a piano that somebody is always playing, sometimes with an impromptu sing along that is as beautiful as could be. The slip and slide is still just as slippery as last year and the beloved oreo dessert still slaps. And the kids still leave smiling ear to ear, because for 4 short yet oh so long days, they are known, loved, and welcomed exactly as they are.

Massanetta is a place for play, a place for renewal, a place to just be, and most of all a place to learn more about God. A place where they can be wholeheartedly themselves, and be completely embraced in love. This is a space that is sacred because it is so hard to find that these days for our middlers—and let’s be honest, for adults.

Every year I tell you one most unique things about the middle school conference at Netta is the Advocate program. Advocates are 44 high school students that apply to spend two weeks leading the camp. They *pay* to spend two weeks of their summer helping middlers grow in faith. They design meaningful skits, lead worship and recreation, and most notably provide a space in encounter groups for youth to reflect on what they’re learning about God and their walk of discipleship. And 1 in 7 of these Advocates have grown up to become pastors, many who share that it all started at the Massanetta Middle School Conference.

One of our youth from our collaborative Youth initiative with Covenant Pres, Kylie Simmington, just returned home from two weeks as an Advocate and we got to see her in action this summer. What I discovered was that our Advocates do more than we think—they not only decide the theme, but they decide the theme breakdown, what scriptures we are using, what is preached about every day. From start to finish, this middle school conference is steered by 10th 11th and 12th graders. Not only are these Advocates someone our kids look up to, these Advocates are doing the work of the church, grappling with and proclaiming God’s word, helping form the faith of youth just a few years younger than them. So today, as I share with you what we talked about at Massanetta last week, join me in giving thanks to God for the many youth who are not the future of the church—they are the church *now*.

This year’s theme was Peace-ing Together, Piece by Piece and we started with the question: what is peace?

In English, we only have the one word. We use “peace” for a ceasefire and a nap and a Tuesday with nothing on the calendar. But scripture hands us at least three very different pictures of peace in three different verses.

Let us therefore make every effort to pursue what leads to peace and to mutual upbuilding.

Ridgley: peace as something to pursue — an action verb, a direction, something we chase.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Ridgley: Peace as a new understanding which God can only provide. The kind of peace that eases our worries and fear. Jesus provides a new way of what Peace could mean apart from the way we understand it.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Ridgley: Peace as a promise- Inviting us to think about Peace as something that is bigger and better and more incredible than we can even understand. A peace so big it doesn't even need our comprehension to do its work.

An action. A new understanding. A promise. And underneath all three of those is one of the oldest words for peace there is — It's Hebrew: shalom. And shalom doesn't mean quiet or even calm. Shalom means wholeness. Nothing missing. Nothing broken. Every piece of the puzzle finally in its place. That is the peace God is dreaming for us, and it's the peace we spent the week unpacking.

According to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at the University of Southern California, the average brain generates 48.6 thoughts per minute—amounting to about 70,000 thoughts per day. So, whether you are a muddler or an adult, Peace is hard to come by. And if you have ever found yourself wide awake in the middle of the night with racing thoughts, you can confirm that peace and quiet are not the same thing.

Our advocates acted out a skit about the miracle of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are terrified, the boat is being swamped, and Jesus — asleep, apparently unbothered by any of it — wakes up and says only, "Peace. Be still." And the wind dies down. It gets quiet. But the gospel of Mark tells us the disciples were now more afraid, not less — "who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Quiet had settled over the water but Peace, real peace, was still arriving.

Psalms 46 knows this rhythm too. We quote its most famous line — "Be still, and know that I am God" but often forget that it's not how the psalm *starts*. It starts with mountains shaking and waters roaring and nations in an uproar. The stillness doesn't come before the chaos. It comes from inside it, and in spite of it.

Peace is not spoken into already-quiet rooms. Peace is spoken into the storm, into the racing thoughts in the middle of the night. That's exactly where we need it most — and exactly where we're least likely to notice it on our own.

Later that day, we moved the conversation from the Sea of Galilee into the garden; the Advocates made a community garden on stage acting out skits about how peace can be compared to gardening and growing plants: it doesn't always happen completely on its own. It takes tending. It means getting your hands dirty and dirt under your fingernails. It is the same with peace--We can't bring about peace in the chaos out there if we haven't tended to the peace inside here (point to heart). To do that, our keynoter reminded us that sometimes the best thing we can do, is take a deep breath, and tend to ourselves. One of the advocates came on stage to share how he finds inner peace; he said, "inner peace isn't a calm life with no problems. It's finding the still place inside the chaos, because the chaos generally isn't optional. Another said

“peace isn’t about having a perfect life — it’s about knowing that no matter what happens, you’re not alone, and you’re going to be okay.”

The next day we learned about the Celtic Christian tradition’s concept of “thin places” Our own Presbyterian ancestors, several centuries back called thin places places where the distance between heaven and earth gets so close you can almost feel it. Not because God is more present there than anywhere else. God is everywhere, always. But some places make it easier for us to notice.

For one of our advocates, it was Massanetta itself — the one place where she could put her phone down and feel, in her words, “more like myself.” For another, it was a bench built in memory of a childhood friend who died in second grade, where he still goes to pray and to remember. For another, it was a sunrise on a South Carolina beach with his dad, both of them quiet, watching the sky fill with color. For our keynoter, it was a piano bench, headphones on, nobody listening, just making music for the sake of making it.

I wonder for you-- Where is your thin place? Where do you feel like you can sense God among you so clearly?

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Psalm 23 might be the oldest answer the Bible gives us: “He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.” We mostly hear that psalm at funerals, which is a little bit of a shame, because it’s really a psalm about living. A psalm about a Shepherd who knows exactly where the resting places are, even when we’ve forgotten how to look for them ourselves.

Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called children of God

That night, we widened our focus-- out from inside us, out from our thin places, into the people around us, in our communities. And here our keynoter drew a hard line between two things that sound alike but are not: keeping the peace and making it.

Keeping the peace is what most of us default to. Smooth it over. Let it go. Don't rock the boat. Sometimes that's wisdom. Often, our keynoter admitted, it's just exhaustion or fear taking over. Because Peacemaking is risky Peacemaking is harder. Peacemaking takes courage. Peace making is an active verb, ongoing work. Jesus doesn't say, "blessed are the conflict-free." Not "blessed are the ones who never have an issue." Blessed are the ones doing something about it. Blessed are the peacemakers.

Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is...of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God...Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual upbuilding.

We learn from Paul's letter to the Romans that our work should be about pursuing a peace that brings about mutual upbuilding—bringing about what is the best for the entire community, what builds up your neighbor, even when your neighbor may be the very thing that makes peacemaking hard. Peace is a two-way street, and peace is the work we are called to—the type of peace that mutually upholds a community.

Our keynoter told the kids about a tight-knit group of friends who've stayed close for decades by having the hard conversations instead of avoiding them — the here's-how-I-felt-hurt conversations, the ones that sometimes end in tears before they end in anything good. He told them about his own congregation's twenty-year journey toward fuller welcome of all people—slow, sometimes painful, ultimately holy work.

An advocate came on stage and shared that peacemaking and mutual upbuilding can also look like recognizing when you need to ask for help and allowing people to help you do something together, realizing that together she was able to go further with her community because of that vulnerability.

*In the last days
the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
³ He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
⁴ Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.*

The last keynote focused on the idea of world peace—and just how daunting that can feel as a middler (and even as an adult). It almost feels like an unattainable concept. It is too big, too far away, nothing one person or one church can solve completely on their own. He compared it to trying to light a candle one Christmas Eve Worship Service.

One Christmas Eve, he went to light the Christ candle during worship, and the HVAC vent right behind it kept blowing it out. He'd light it. It would go out. He'd light it again, mid-sentence, trying not to let the congregation notice. It went out again. And again. He didn't figure out it was the heating vent until he'd relit that candle more times than he'd like to admit.

"We all have a light in us," he told the kids. "The world is going to try to blow it out. The only thing we can do is relight it." It's not naïve or pretending the wind isn't real. It's refusing to let the wind have the last word.

That's John's gospel, almost exactly: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Not will not — did not. Past tense. Already settled. And a few verses later: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." Or, in Eugene Peterson's looser paraphrase, the Word "moved into the neighborhood." Peace with skin on. Peace next door.

The prophet Micah gives us a picture of what that looks like at full scale: swords beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, everyone sitting safely under their own vine and fig tree, afraid of no one. One of the advocates shared the clearest example he had for peace, a garden trowel forged from a melted-down handgun through a ministry that turns surrendered firearms into tools for growing things. Sam shared "this trowel doesn't pretend that a gun never existed, it doesn't solve gun violence on its own. But it shows that something can change. Something that was widely recognized as harmful, could be reformed into something gentle and life-giving. It points to the world Micah was imagining — where swords are beaten into plowshares. A world where we don't have to fear one another, a world where we make tools to help people, not hurt people, a world where we can build and practice peace. Maybe peace starts with us reforming parts of ourselves in ways that can work toward a better world.

"That's the trick of world peace, TJ said, "you don't get there by trying to fix everything everywhere. You get there by making a difference where you are. You get there by doing one thing, right where your feet happen to be planted. You could be the person who doesn't leave when someone is hurting. You can be the person who has important things to say when it was easier to keep the peace. You could fill the food pantry one box at a time or walk alongside someone while they found their footing again. The light, relit, however many times it takes.

So this morning, I want us to pick up where we ended at Massanetta. At the end of your pew, you'll find a puzzle piece that's blank. You can write on it or leave it blank, whichever your prefer. But whenever you see this puzzle piece in your car, purse or on the kitchen counter I want you to remember this:

We are not asked to manufacture world peace. We are asked to tend the peace inside us, find the thin places that restore our souls, do the harder work of making peace instead of merely keeping it, and refuse to let the world blow out the one light we've each been given to carry. We can bring about Peace, together, Piece by piece. Not because the whole project depends on any one of us, but because none of it happens without all of us, together, pursuing what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding — for each other.

Paul wrote that sentence into a fighting, fractured church and trusted that it would still be true on the other side of the argument. I believe it's still true on the other side of whatever you've carried here this morning — whatever has you lying awake in the middle of the night, whatever light that feels close to going out.

The darkness has not overcome it. Take a breath. Relight it. Pursue what makes for peace.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN”