

Title: Gospel Making Peace

Subtitle: Finding reconciliation and healing in the cross of Jesus

Video URL See: <https://stmmsevenlakes.org/sermons/>

There are some weeks when the themes in the readings pull my heart in multiple directions, especially when our Old and New Testament lessons touch on volatile emotional issues like discrimination, abuse, or insensitivity to human needs. If I sound a little edgy, it is because I was exposed this past week to an overload of human need in my own community, when out of the blue, I was called to serve on the Grand Jury for the City of High Point. On the very first day, after being appointed to this task, I, along with seventeen others, was given the responsibility to review and indict for prosecution over two hundred and fifty felony cases. To say the least, my first day on the job felt overwhelming.

Jeremiah must have felt the same way when he was called to address Israel and Judah's kings for not attending to the needs of God's people. Paul must have felt this way as he addresses the prejudice and enmity that existed for centuries between Jews and Gentiles. And our Gospel depicts the exhaustion the disciples faced due to the unrelenting demands of ministry.

Our culture has faced similar pressures, as it too seems to be reeling from the stress of pandemic isolation and discord in its political structures. Unfortunately, many have chosen to express their disappointment by angrily denouncing everything they are upset about through social media.

Unloading anger has a place. We need people full of passion and prophetic power who try to address injustice, racism, violence, and political discord. But too often, what is expressed leaves us in a place where many feel even more stuck in a morass of bitterness and hatred towards those who express views different from their own.

Addressing difficult social issues is nothing new to God's people. Jeremiah begins his message by pronouncing woes to the unfaithful shepherds, who were destroying and scattering the sheep of God's pasture. But when you read further, you will find that Jeremiah doesn't stay in the "woe to you" mode forever. As Jeremiah continues preaching, God begins to speak through him, saying, *"I myself will care for my people, so that they no longer need to fear or tremble. And my people will dwell securely."*¹

The prophet, whose words sounded so angry at first, concludes with a promise. God's promise. That God will draw his people to himself, and care for them, and lead, guide, and shepherd them, as we see so beautifully exemplified in the Gospel today.

There is a time and place to address complex issues. Throughout salvation history, God's people have engaged with culture and looked closely at those things that give offense before moving too quickly to a spiritual solution. Saint Paul, in our readings today, brings into clear view the hostility and alienation that existed in the Jew/Gentile divide. When he addresses Gentiles, he reminds them that before Christ, they were *"strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world."*² The problems he described are not just cultural but spiritual. The sinful effects of Adam's fall have resulted in alienation and discrimination that has affected every generation.

Addressing the issues of racism and discrimination takes a great deal of skill, which was evident in people like Martin Luther King Junior, who the 60's faced insurmountable odds. He is an example for us, for he was willing to take abuse and suffer for what he preached. In his "I have a Dream" speech, he said that God was going to carve out of a mountain of despair, a stone of hope. The rhetoric for this imagery came from Daniel 2:38, which gives us a promise that God is going to

¹ Jeremiah 23:4

² Ephesians 2:12

build his kingdom, even when the nations of the world seem to be falling apart. It was, therefore, faith in God that gave people like Martin Luther King hope against all odds as he faced personal suffering in his endeavors to bring about change. We, too, in our day, need that kind of faith as we wrestle with our own despair as we encounter our current American culture, which seems to be more divided than ever.

In 2019, the Pew Research Center offered a nonpartisan poll asking single Americans if they would mind dating someone who didn't vote the way they did. Turns out they did mind a lot. Nearly a quarter of single republicans said they wouldn't date a democrat. While 43% of Democrats said they wouldn't date a republican. Pew believes this political aversion has grown significantly in the past 12 years to historic highs. More than half of each party sees each other as more closed-minded and has an aversion that labels the other as unpatriotic, dishonest, blind to the facts, and even immoral. The majority of each party sees the other party as too extreme. I have sadly observed a similar kind of polarization even among relatives and friends who feel their Christian values are threatened by today's political trends. And it seems like the more a person spends time watching cable news and browsing social media, the worse the problem becomes. Please don't misunderstand my intentions, I am not advocating a pacifist position, but in the midst of the controversy, I seek a more excellent way.

Jesus said, **“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**³ We usually don't describe people we disagree with like enemies, but it doesn't mean we consider them as friends either. Paul said in Romans, **“Live in harmony with one another, repay no one evil with evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”**⁴

³ Matthew 5:44

⁴ Romans 12:16-18

Three times, Saint Paul reminds us in our New Testament lesson from Ephesians today that, in Christ, we find our peace. ***“For he is our peace, who has made us both one.”***⁵ He did not tell both sides in the Jew/Gentile divide to compromise or even to adjust. His way was not to negotiate at the bargaining table. He did not seek to Christianize Jews or Judaize Gentiles culturally. Instead, he brought both parties to the cross.

It must have been unbelievably hard for traditional Jews to lay their highly regarded religious customs at the foot of the cross in the belief they were no longer necessary. Gentiles also had their idolatrous ways that needed to be put aside. We all have things that need to be put aside if Christ is to be preeminent, and at the top of the list is our personal pride and sense of self-righteousness. Just because we are Christians does not make us better than others. We are all sinners in need of a savior who helps us to dismantle “walls of partition” that separate us.

God is building his new society quietly but relentlessly. This new society of black and white, rich and poor, sinner and saint, male and female, bond and free is what God calls his church, his body. She is a new creation. She is able to do what civil laws can never accomplish and be what no political society can enforce. She, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is reconciling us to God where there are no “strangers and foreigners,” but only ***“fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.”***⁶ This community is not based on common needs and shared problems. It is a community built “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,”⁷ whose principles are in sharp contrast to philosophies and lifestyles of the secular world.

A new popular Christian song, entitled “Orphans of God,” expresses the sentiments that Paul addressed. The words of the song go:

⁵ Ephesians 2:14

⁶ Ephesians 2:19

⁷ Ephesians 2:20

*Who here among us has not been broken
Who here among us is without guilt or pain
So oft' abandoned by our transgressions
If such a thing as grace exists
Then grace was made for lives like this*

Then the chorus introduces the refrain:

*There are no strangers
There are no outcasts
There are no orphans of God
So many fallen, but hallelujah
There are no orphans of God*

The song continues with an invitation:

*Come ye unwanted and find affection
Come all ye weary, come and lay down your head*

Then it ends with a prayer:

*O blessed Father, look down upon us
We are Your children, we need Your love
We bow before Your throne of mercy
And seek Your face to rise above.⁸*

The Church of Jesus Christ needs to be a place where no one feels like an orphan. If we are “a holy temple in the Lord” in which “God dwells by His Spirit,”⁹ then certainly his love will break down every wall that separates us. And hopefully, we will be people who appeal to others who are different than ourselves by living such compelling lives that people will want what we have and be thirsty to believe what we say we have found. Amen.

⁸ Song was quoted only in part. The writers: Joel Lindsey and Twila Labar and made popular by Cana’s Voice

⁹ Ephesians 2:21-22

Reflection Questions

- Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” Can you think of ways we identify those who don’t agree with us as “other”? And how can you begin to understand those you disagree with?
- The baggage between different classes or groups who have a history of enmity is significant. It is not a matter of “moving on,” most of the time, it is a matter of moving forward. How can we move forward toward reconciliation and forgiveness? Have you seen this in your life or in the life of someone close to you? Conversely, have you seen situations where someone chose not to forgive?

Reflections for Further Study

- Read Romans 12:19 **“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”** Loving those who have hurt us doesn’t mean we dismiss the wrong they have done. It means we care too much about justice to forget past injustices. Can you think of some injustices that will be made right only in heaven?
- Loving your enemies is easier if you understand them. Jonathan Haidt, a professor of ethical leadership at Leonard N. Stern School of Business, and New York Times bestseller, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, has argued, people are primarily driven by emotions and group identity. If that is true, how can you begin to understand those you disagree with?
- One way to appeal to people who are different from you is to live such a compelling life that people will want to believe what you have to say. Have you ever met someone whose conduct made you want to grow closer to Jesus? What are some adjectives that describe the character and behavior of those people? What is it about a peaceful life that attracts people to it? Have you ever seen

an example of two people from different political or religious perspectives who focused on what they had in common and treated each other with respect? [We have all seen people with such pride that they looked down on others who didn't hold their point of view. See the parable of the Publican and Sinner (Luke 18:9-14). Do you have a strained relationship with someone due to differences of opinion or values? Could you focus on the things you have in common?

- When differences need to be addressed, how can you do so from a place of peaceful calm and love, leaving the results up to God?
- Read Matthew 5:43-45 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Sometimes it feels like rifts with colleagues, or family members will never get any better. It may help you to remember that God asks you not to restore relationships but to love and pray for people. God alone can change hearts and fix what is broken. Are there a few people you can add to your prayer list?
- In South Africa, an entire government perpetuated injustice, targeting its own citizens as enemies. We know that every society is full of sin and often pits people against one another based on things such as race, socio-economic status, education, geography, or political party. How can we be working to change the way our culture privileges some groups over others, making people feel like enemies? What is God calling us to do while we are waiting for him to come and make things right?