

Today we are beginning the Season of Peace. This emphasis around peace will take us from an inward focus to an outward, all-encompassing focus. We will explore peace within, peace in relationships, peace in community, and wholistic peace. We will conclude on the first Sunday of October with World Communion Sunday. This will be the perfect time for each of us to reflect on the ways we are experiencing, creating, and maybe even avoiding peace in our lives. I look forward to hearing your reflections on this Season as we journey together.

Today we begin with peace within as we look at Matthew, chapter 18, verses 15 through 20. Listen for God's word to you this day:

⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by God in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Take a moment to think of things that keep you from experiencing peace within. Is it something to do with the state of the world? Is it something to do with relationships you have? Or, wish to have? Is it something to do with your church family? In today's pericope Matthew is

writing directly to his Jewish Christian audience as he explains how Jesus called his disciples to respond to conflict within the faith community.

We begin with an understanding that Jesus would have expected there to be conflict. There is no presumption that just because one is a person of faith they will be without conflict. We know this to be true as we have each been harmed by someone and caused harm, resulting in conflict and lack of peace within. We begin learning how to handle conflict at a young age, wrestling with that inner turmoil. We see the ways our families handle discord, or we experience conflict in the work setting and have to navigate how to respond, or maybe we have been shown how to handle conflict by the church, and maybe it has been a brush it under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist approach. All of these ways of handling conflict avoid the reconciliation and healing that Jesus suggests is possible.

This text tells us that when someone in our faith community sins against us we should go directly to them to address the wound that has been created. How easy is that to do? How often do we let those sinful wounds simmer within us before we address them? And, do we always do as Jesus suggests, going directly to the offender without involving others?

We automatically locate ourselves as the one being offended in passages like these, I think its natural, but it is possible, and even likely that at some point in our familial church commitment to one another we will each be the offender who has caused some sort of harm to another. Take a moment to consider the times you have been on the offending side of a conflict. It is crucial for us to see ourselves on both sides of the situation. By having an understanding of both sides of the coin we will be willing to approach the one who has caused us harm, and be approachable when we have caused harm to another.

But, we know, from the text and from our own life experiences that one-on-one conversation does not heal all wounds and so the text tells us if this offense cannot be resolved one-on-one then it is ok to bring in one or two witnesses, these are not people you have tried to previously convince of your argument or have heard you gossip about this person or situation for months, that of course would flip the script and make you, the gossiper, the offender. These are people who are to give witness to the conversation and its outcome. Then, if resolution is still not possible, it is to be taken to the entire church body.

Can you imagine? This is about as far outside our Western individualistic comfort zone as anything. The thought that we would ask someone to appear before the church to hear how they have wounded the body seems like one of the most outrageous requests I could think of a church making in our modern culture.

But, and this is a big but, when done correctly, when done with honest, good, healing intentions, this can bring the body back together, it can bring healing where it seems as though none is possible, or at least that is what Jesus seems to be implying. I think this is so difficult for us to hear and accept as a way of living because for us we see our membership in the church as a gift to the church, not the other way around. Debie Thomas reminds us that “We think this way, not because the Bible offers us any sanction or justification for doing so, but because we don’t want to surrender the idols of individualism and personal independence.”¹

Pastor Charles Hambrick-Stowe talking about individualism in the church says, “The church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that regulates its corporate life by the will of the elite, the powerful, or the majority; it is a fellowship of believers united with one another

¹ Thomas, Debie, www.journeywithjesus.net, August 30, 2020.

in Jesus Christ under his headship.”² A fellowship of believers united with one another in Jesus Christ under his headship. We are a group of Christ followers who have chosen to be part of this community that acts like a family, the family of Christ, and together we make up the body of Christ in this world, so to wound and injure one, is to wound and injure the whole. And, furthermore, our commitment to the church is a calling of a higher level of relationship.

Being a Christian of substance is hard, deep, work. We know that this type of approach to relationships, this idea of reconciliation is not one we often see modeled in the world, and yet the one whom we follow says it is possible. The question as Debie Thomas asks, is: “do I care about reconciliation, justice, repentance, and restoration as much as Jesus does? Or have I settled for a spiritual life in the shallows?”³ We can remain on the surface, we can pretend we are a family or we can be a family, not like the family you grew up in, a different model of family. We can have peace within because we have done the hard, deep spiritual work in community with other Christ followers, or we can live in the turmoil, on the surface with a mound of piled up anger, resentment and sadness bubbling just below the surface all while wearing a smile on our face.

This sort of reconciliation is not for everyone, there will be some who will not be able to listen to the ways they’ve caused wounds, or because of their own pain will turn around and cause harm to others and those people may leave the community. What is so striking is that Jesus says to treat these like Gentiles and tax collectors. As a reminder, Matthew is writing to a Jewish Christian community and while it may be our first assessment that we should deal with

² Hambrick-Stowe, Charles, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, 46.

³ Thomas, Debie, www.journeywithjesus.net, August 30, 2020.

the Gentiles and tax collectors by forgetting about them, that is exactly the opposite of what Jesus does. Jesus welcomes the Gentiles; he eats meals with the tax collectors. Love and care for those who have left the community can and should still exist. We do not wash our hands of people with whom we have conflict. As a Christ follower that is not possible. Again wisdom from Debie Thomas: “Even as we acknowledge and grieve brokenness, even as we make painful decisions to safeguard the church, even as we recognize that the insider is now “outside,” we practice hospitality. We extend care. We hold open the possibility of repentance, reconciliation, restoration, and renewal. Even in the mess and muck of life together, we cling to the promise of resurrection, and honor the outsider as the beloved of God.”⁴ We are all children of God, that never changes.

In this moment when it is easy to feel so divided, when everything feels like a mess and we want to classify people as friend or foe, yet we are reminded that Jesus calls us to something deeper, to a life more enriched by difference and diversity than our individualistic minds would prefer. Being part of the community of faith, at least a Christian community of faith (and I would argue many others) is not an individual, voluntary association, it is a commitment to submit oneself to the will of God, to the embodiment of Jesus Christ, to a higher calling of character and action that can result, at times, in difficult conversation and conflict. But Jesus, promises that in this way of interacting, engaging with depth and integrity, care and love, we will find peace within, we will be confident that we have done everything possible to bring reconciliation and healing where there was once harm and woundedness.

⁴ Thomas, Debie, www.journeywithjesus.net, August 30, 2020.

It seems as though Jesus is telling us of all our possibilities, of all the potential we have to be a model community for the world, to be something that looks different than the rest of the world, if only we can bring ourselves to live into it. We, the community of Jesus followers, have been given much power, eternal power in fact, to loose and bind what will be found in heaven. Professor Jin S. Kim explains this significance: "The church has not been given the power to 'bind' and 'loose' because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur."⁵

We have infinite opportunities for practicing these expressions of faith today. We have infinite opportunity for peace within. Confession, justice, repentance, and reconciliation should be our way of life, wherever there is strife. And especially within the body of Christ. It feels like dreaming thinking about the peace we would find within ourselves if this were our approach 100% of the time. I'm just hopeful enough to believe its possible.

Friends, my hope and desire for you, for us as a community of faith is that we each experience peace within because we have done the deep, spiritual work required of us by Jesus Christ. That we have prioritized confession, restoration, and reconciliation. That we would each struggle through the wounds to find healing in this community of faithful believers in Jesus Christ as we submit to Jesus' headship in our commitment to this family.

Wouldn't it be remarkable for us, Grace First Presbyterian Church, to be an example of Christ's calling to live in unity with one another despite our differences? Therefore, in that hope, I encourage you to seek out those who have sinned against you, to invite conversation, and if you have been the offender to be willing to listen to the one who has been harmed.

⁵ Kim, Jin S., Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, 48.

Sunday, September 6, 2020
Matthew 18:15-20

Grace First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Ashley Drake Mertz

Healing is possible, Jesus came to bring healing to this world, to us, and he's showing us the way. A way that gives us each peace within for the living of these days.