

Isaiah 11:1-10 ~ Romans 15:4-13 (The Message Bible)

What Does Peace Look Like?

December 8, 2019 ~ Second Sunday of Advent

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Intro to Scripture Reading:

Hey, You Apples and Oranges; You Oil and Vinegar; You Extroverts and Introverts; Coffee Lovers and Tea Devotees, Night owls and Crack-of-Dawn-Getter-Uppers; Hey you Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings fans, you Badgers and Buckeye boosters: *.Are all of you also Christ-followers?* Peace be between you and among you. Take it from Paul in this snippet of his Letter to the church in Rome that has become a premier document of Christian theology. We get to hear him tackle big questions like, what does it mean that Jesus saves? Paul is a truth teller, here to help us out today with this question.

Here's the part we are going to look at today: To be a "Christ-follower" is to be a peacemaker. To be a "Christ-follower" in a community of believers is to learn how to in harmony with others. How to seek harmony above all else. Yes: harmony--not one note monotone, unanimity. Harmony requires at least two notes, and more. We heard a beautiful example earlier this hour with the Marshfield High School Madrigals. How did they do that? Harmony requires many *different* notes vibrating together: the more notes, thicker the chord, the better.

Our Second Scripture Lesson is Paul's application of Isaiah's amazing poetic vision sometimes called, "The Peaceable Kingdom." Artists through the centuries, and around the globe have rendered this vision with stunning veracity in water color and oil, in sculpture and song. Their art can lift our hearts, convict our souls, and stir up in us the possibility of changing our otherwise stuck notions of how things are. Former prey and those they prey upon now dwell together in harmony? That seems crazy if you look around and see all the dissonance and discord across the land and world. Yet: turning this poetic, fantastic vision into an on-the-ground reality is *exactly* what Advent celebrates and anticipates: Christ crashing into this world, God becoming one of us homo sapiens, to show us what peace looks like. Advent is a call to action. In the light of Christ, peace can happen. Peace can push back the darkness, one step at a time. One piece of straw in the manger at a time.

Here's the thing: moving toward the peaceable kingdom in the flesh, in the here and now, takes a community. Yes: a group of real people who are annoyingly different in any number of ways. Ways that make it difficult for us to understand each other. Different ages, races, cultures, income brackets, gender identities, different mental and physical abilities and gifts. Paul's good news to the Christians in Rome (that may seem like bad news on the surface) is that their unity and our unity, as a community of Christ-followers is based on something *unlikely*. It's based on God's self-emptying work of Christ on the cross: a unity based on God's *unlikely, disproportionate grace*. What is God up to?

Paul is teaching us that the peaceable, or peace-*able* kingdom is *not* based on "likes" or "likeability" or surface-level "like-mindedness." That is *so* 21st century USA. Besides-- how is all that liking or disliking, all that friending and un-friending going for us? Christ came to show us that we can and must do better. Christ came to save us from our worst selves. Paul's letter to the Romans (which you *are* about to hear) can help us out. Before we re-tweet words that may ignite our anger; and before we "unfriend" the next friend or family member we vehemently disagree with, take a breath. Then consider Paul's words (as rendered in The Message Bible) to the diverse Christians in Rome in the mid-first century and to all of us with our differences here in December of 2019--just about to polish off the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Sermon:

Was he talking to us?

How many times, how many ways do we have to be told

Before we are sold on, before we are eager to buy into, before we sign up for the job of bringing God's peace, into our world:

One decision, one word, one small gesture at a time:

Whatever it takes to lurch or leap or lumber forward

into the peace that Jesus came to show us. Into the peace that will save us.

Was he talking to us?

How many times, how many ways do we have to be told

Before we are willing to stand in line, cross the line, draw a line in the sand:

Whatever it takes to bring our world closer to the peace that passes understanding:

That's right, don't try to understand it, just try doing it:

The peace that lets unimportant differences go;

The peace that relentlessly seeks common ground by listening

The peace where the cow learns from the bear and the bear learns from the cow.

Was he talking to us?

How many times, how many ways do we have to be told

That God is the One who can bring forth a beautiful shoot from what *looks like* nothing

but an ugly, old, dead stump. Except it happens to be the stump and the root of Jesse.

Our spiritual ancestor root: the square root with the exponential capacity

of the self-emptying Christ, who saves by dying and rising again and again and again.

whenever we take that bold step toward peace. Stepping out, like Jesus.

Was he talking to us?

How many times, how many ways do we have to be told

this Peace learns to look beyond appearances.

this Peace remembers to say, "I'm sorry" whenever we forget and make snap judgments.

this Peace lets the Holy spirit cleanse us from the plaque of accumulated negativity

clogging the arteries of our souls.

Was he talking to us?

How many times how many ways do we have to be told

God will be the judge.

The One who judges *not* according to appearances or hearsay.

The One who favors the poor, the meek.

The One who came to this world as a baby in a manger

to bring justice, to advocate for the oppressed, the voiceless, the invisible

The One who made one world and filled it with plants, animals, and people

who could all fit together on our one and only planet:

Maybe we don't actually believe in God's unlikely, disproportionate grace.

Maybe we just can't see what God's disproportionate peace looks like. Isaiah gave us a clue:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

When we hear this beloved verse at this time of year, we think, “Oh yes, Jesus came as a child to lead us.” That is one interpretation of how we, as Christians understand this verse. Jesus was the one who came to show us what Divine Love looks like in human form. To help us know it when we see it. Part of the disproportion I see in this verse, along with God of all creation becoming a single human being. Another disproportion is the power of a child to be a champion peacemaker. Pint-size heroes that might not be tall enough to spot in a crowd. But so tree tall in spirit, that we would do well to imitate them.

Remember gutsy little Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to desegregate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. In November of 1960? She was born in 1954, so that would make her all of six years old. When she took this step toward a more just system of public education in our country. More recently, you may have heard of young Muzoon Almellehan, who fled Syria at age 13 and became a Syrian activist and refugee working mightily out of the United Kingdom to keep Syrian girls in school. Another teen who is able to witness in a way that only a teen can do, is Emma Gonzalez, survivor of the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School whose activism for gun control brought the country to a halt for six minutes, the stunningly short, achingly long amount of time it took for the gunman to cut down 17—as Emma Gonzalez held silence during her speech time at the March for Our Lives protest.

Amylee Bowman was the 17 year-old who took a step that saved multiple lives in New Bedford, Mass. She is described as a happy go lucky wicked-cool 17 year old senior “troubled” girl—who cut class often, was bounced from an apartment to her grandparents’ trailer. She confessed to Mrs. Jupin, her teacher that she and her friends were planning a shooting spree bigger than Columbine, at their school that fall. Amylee broke the “code of silence” among her peers. Why? Because of her teacher who payed attention to her and took an interest in her and developed a rapport she was craving. Who knows how many lives were saved by her courage.

As we are too well aware: these shootings have become more common, not less. Just this past week, there were two shootings at two Naval bases, Pearl Harbor-Hickam and Pensacola, Florida. There were also two shootings by Wisconsin high school students this past week in Oshkosh and Waukesha. And another two police officers in two different states were shot in the line of duty, in these past two weeks. There is no single cause or single solution to the epidemic of gun violence in our land. Yes, together, as Christ’s community of peacemakers, surely believe that Christ can show us the way. One step at a time. One straw in the manger at a time.

I have one more story about another six-year girl – the same age as Ruby Bridges. But this is the story of local six year old that happened this past October, in a neighborhood near here. And it had to do with shooting baskets, not guns. A father was watching his recently adopted 8 year old son, from China as he started shooting baskets with “the girl across the street.”

The dad, Brett Shilton, tells the story like this: *“Though he didn’t make a lot of shots at first, he was diligent to keep shooting the basketball. He kept at it. Sometimes he’d completely miss everything: hoop, backboard, net. But he wasn’t deterred by it—he just kept chasing the ball down and coming back and shooting again.*

And she kept shooting, too. Determined to keep making shots. And she suggested they start counting, keeping track. “First one to five!” “Okay” And the competition was on. But it was friendly. Not forceful. Encouraging. And over the next half hour I watched two neighbors, two classmates, two friends, play, shoot, count, score, shoot, rebound, and count again. I watched them encourage each other. Really, it was she who did the encouraging. Cheering actually. It was amazing. As my son still struggles with language, she was counting his shots, keeping record of how many he had. First one to five changed to 7 then 10, then 20. Then it was just him. As he kept making shots, she kept count and kept cheering. She stopped shooting. He got 20! I can’t believe it! On to 30, 40, even 50 and she kept cheering. Oh sure, I was proud of my son for just keeping at it. But I was really impressed with her, too. To just step back and be truly excited about what someone else was doing without any expectation.”

And that’s when it hit me: this is what we should all be about. Invite someone in, make space for them, step back, watch and cheer. Her thrill came with his achievement. What humility! What grace! What selflessness! What love. It was her ball he was using. Her court he was on. Her game he entered into. But it was her joy, too. No envy. She stayed engaged and active. Participating, but no longer competing. Not afraid not to win. The game had changed. Her win was from his winning.ⁱ

Yes: the game had changed: a little child displaying, unaware of what she was doing, what disproportionate grace and saving peace looks like with two people, two little people, on the ground. All of these children, each in their own unique contexts: Ruby Bridges, Muzoon Almellehan, Emma Gonzalez, Amylee Bowman and “the girl across the street” who happens to be Rayleigh, our own Rodette and Randy Mess’ granddaughter, are leading us. Only if we follow. They are all showing us what peacemaking looks like.

Jesus came to change the game. Was he talking to us? Oh yes, I believe he is.

ⁱ <https://medium.com/@brettshilton/neighborhood-basketball-21e5ad3f7e5a>