

Genesis 2:18-24 ~ Matthew 5:9
Taking Care of All Creation
 19th Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 3, 2021
 World Communion ~ Peace & Global Witness Offering
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Our second scripture lesson today is just one verse—one beatitude that Jesus preached to the crowd on the mountain. Here is Matthew 5:9, one verse in three different translations.

NRSV: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

From The Message Bible, Eugene Peterson has rendered it like this, (Matthew 5:9)
You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

From Good as New: A Radical Retelling of the Scriptures by John Henson:
Splendid are those who help enemies to be friends: They will be recognized as God's children.

Communion Meditation

Mom: (*Ring dinner bell*) Time for Dinner!!!

Child #1: But Mah-om! She started it!

Child #2 No, I didn't! It's *her* fault. She started it.

Child #1 NO, I didn't!

Child#2 Oh yes, you did!

Child #1: Did not!

Child #2 Did too!

Mom: I'm not interested in who *started* it. I want to see who's going to end it.

Child #1 and #2 Oh mom—you *ALWAYS* say that.

We want to win every fight. And of course: We think our way is best. Our way is the ONLY way. If everybody would just come to their senses and see it like we do...Then the world would be a better place, fighting would cease, and everyone would be happy. Especially me. While this way of thinking sounds simplistic and childish, it is precisely this kind of thinking that drives our every day, inevitable conflicts down the path into lasting hurt, hate, and horrible consequences. Whether the fight is between siblings or spouses; within churches, school boards, political parties, or our congress; or even between countries or competing ideologies. Whatever the level of conflict, whoever the players: we fight to win.

Yet throughout our Bible, our holy "Play Book" from Genesis to Revelation, God, our divine parent calls out to us, "Now children, I'm not interested in who started it. I want to see who's going to end it!" That used to bug me so much when my mom or dad would say that, *especially* when we were right in the heat of an argument that I thought I was winning. Honestly, doesn't it bug us when we hear Jesus calling us to be peacemakers, to choose to cooperate instead of fight; to become splendid by helping enemies to be friends?

The truth is, we seem to be far better at starting conflicts, stoking the fire of the rage, improving our arsenal of weapons (whether verbal, physical, or mechanical) than we are at ending a conflict that's boiling our blood. Who really wants to sit down at a table and engage with people who disagree with us? We'd much rather set our jaw, draw our line in the sand, and tell ourselves how right we are. The more "likes" and "followers" we get, the better we feel. The more "likes" and "followers" we get, the more right we surely must be. Right?

Honest confession: Dr. Ralph Watkins, my professor at Columbia Theological Seminary who taught the doctoral class I took on the 21st Century Church, challenged us to make it a spiritual practice to listen to news stations and podcasts on the opposite side of wherever we were on the political spectrum. At least once a week. More often, if possible. I thought that was a great idea. But here's the confession: I have not really done that. It's hard, it goes against our grain and our gut, to listen to "the other side." We don't want to.

Yet, I believe you are here today, in this sanctuary or tuning in on line, because somewhere deep inside you know there is a voice that is telling us you can. That voice is God. That voice is Jesus, the one who became an *Adam*, a human being, to give us peace the world cannot give. To show us how to be peacemakers. When we access that peace, we too can be peacemakers. We too, can help this earth to be a better place for everyone. For all creation.

How can I make this bold claim? It's right here in our first scripture lesson, Genesis 2:18-24. It shimmers with this core truth of what all human beings, all earthlings were born to do. Today's lesson is a small, but richly layered slice of the second creation story in Genesis, that starts at Genesis 2:4b. in which God starts the project of creating the world, not from on high with heavens and the earth (like in Genesis 1:1). God in Genesis 2, starts down in the dirt, adds a little spit, does some divine form of mouth-to-mouth, and poof! The first human being comes to life. Then came trees and the garden planting. Then the animals.

When God takes dirt and fashions the first creature (2.7) in the original Hebrew the word we translate as "man" is "*adam*." Because the word "*admah*" means "ground." English hints at this same relationship: the word "human" comes from the word "*humus*." Which means earth. (Might make you think about the humus you dip your chips into a little differently). Therefore, a more accurate translation of "*adam*" is human being: without regard to gender.

In Genesis 2, God gets Adam formed and breathing and then observes: It is not good that *Adam* should be alone. (This is the very first "not good" by the way in our whole Bible.) It is not good for the human being to be alone. So, God then decides to make *Adam* a helper as his partner. Then, if you think about it, it's almost comical as God tries this animal and then another—starting with cattle! (A little shout out to Wisconsin right there) and gives *Adam* the God-like power of naming each of them. No helper partner could be found with all those animals coming again from the dirt. God next gets the idea of making another human being out of the one already busy breathing and naming animals, but lonely for a companion, a partner, a help-mate.

Here's something about the word translated as "helper" that is important to get clear. A helper in our Bible is not a subordinate, a "less than" role. The Hebrew is "ezer," it is the same word used to describe God, 66 times in Scripture. This "ezer" (pronounced "ay-zer") speaks of God's strength, power, and protection, help, and being a rescuer. Psalm 46, *God is our refuge and strength; a very present **help** in trouble, is a familiar example.* Ezer is also used to describe the Holy Spirit, co-equal with God, Holy Spirit is our advocate, advisor, counselor, *paraklētōs* (called to one's aid) This is the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of our Triune God as helper. Robert Alter translates more precisely what is going on in this original story with the words "correspondence" or "coordination". That is the original intent as best we can uncover: it is we who have falsely assumed the new creature to be secondary in importance to the first creature.

The call for help as coordination or correspondence between co-equals shines a light on the shadow side of what we call "helping" that is really the opposite of God's intent. That's when we use the word "help", when we think we know what another person or group of people needs. Without really asking them. Without listening or viewing the one we are helping as a co-equal. The peacemaker, ezer kind of help, begins with deep listening. With letting the other speak their mind and heart. Giving them the space to form their own thoughts. Whether that is a person you love who is sitting across the table from you, or a group of people living in a country (or fleeing from that country) across the border from us. When we take our place at the table of creation as co-equals, we can see we are only one part of a greater whole.

This story compels us to ask ourselves: If we are flesh of one another's flesh, how then do we treat one another? If we are gifts from God to each other, put on this earth to help one another should we not do our best to treat others with respect and love rather than exploitation and abuse. Friends, this is not just a story about male and female couples, this is a story for all humanity, which these two first human beings represent. This is also a story that tells us what we decide, matters. Did you notice the amount of agency and contingency *Adam* is given in this story?

Translating those lessons into our situation today, in October of 2021, I hear God telling us: The future stands genuinely open. We are not doomed on an unalterable course of destiny. What we decide today and in the short time we are given to live on this earth, determines whether there will be a next human generation. At this point in the arc of our human family, we could put an end to the human race with nuclear weapons, or by continuing the course we are on to kill the earth's ecosystem. But here in this story back in Genesis 2, we can see that God has chosen to establish a relationship with human beings where our decisions truly count. Our decisions can make or break us. That's what I hear in this story today.

Here's the good news: It's not too late to begin to make the systemic changes necessary for peace. Who went to bed too early last Sunday, thinking the Packers had lost their game to the San Francisco 49er's? Well, the 30-28 win did happen, thanks to the 51-yard field goal by Mason Crosby just as time expired. Field goals work! It was not too late for the Packers to win that game. And it is not too late for us to be the peacemakers we were created to be.

With time running out on burning up our earth: We know what we need to do. Here at FPC, we are committed to doing what we can and learning new ways to do more. The work of the Green Team, The Immigration Action Team, and our new Rainbow Team, as well as the mission of our Outreach Committee are all helping to lead us in our peacemaker callings.

As Bethany Sollereeder (research fellow at the Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford) has written, "The urgency of cutting down on carbon emissions is crucial. We should plant more trees, use less stuff, eat less meat, and create less carbon dioxide. These actions will slow the rate of climate change, giving all creatures a chance to migrate and adapt to a new normal—and giving us time to invent new technologies that can help all other creatures live well in a new climate." Ragan Sutterfield, Episcopalian rector and author, adds this note of hope, "We can learn to take care of each other, even into our deaths. We can welcome strangers and share what we have with those in need." This is the hope of the resurrection in this world gripped by death and its powers.ⁱ The hope of the resurrection opens the future to us.

With whom do you need to make peace this day?, Ask the Lord to bring to mind the name of a person, or perhaps an issue, a problem, or an ideology for you to bring to the Table with you in a moment. With whom or what have you been fighting with? This morning, or this week. Or a fight that has gone on so long, you can't remember exactly how or when it got started. As we commune together with the Prince of Peace, ask God to help you listen to them, and listen to yourself with new ears. Voice your truth, listen to theirs. *Ring dinner bell.*

Who will end the fight? You are an *Ezer*, a helper, like no other. Jesus says, no matter how angry or resistant you may feel, "come, eat, listen, and I will show your place. I will show you how *you* can help. No matter how old or you, how broken or spent you feel. This is what you were born for. I am the host, and the meal. I, who am bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, here, for you. I am here so that you can help take care of all creation."

ⁱ These two quotes were taken from two articles in the *Christian Century*, September 22, 2021 issue: "How Will We Adapt? Climate Change is Here" by Bethany Sollereeder, and "Climate Change is a Symptom: Five Ideas for Treating the Larger Disease," by Ragan Sutterfield, pp. 24-39.