

## **“GOD’S PEACE MADE VISIBLE”**

Galatians 5:22-23; Matthew 5:8

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You may have noticed something very unusual this morning. In fact, if your attention wandered at all, you may have missed the scripture readings. Two readings, three verses total. In 31 years of ministry, I have never selected such short readings. If I were sitting out there, my critical mind would kick in and I would be wondering at the nerve of the preacher in ripping not just one verse but three verses from their contexts. I can picture the expressions on the faces of my biblical studies professors were they here this morning. In deference to their influence, I feel compelled to tell you that I know I am breaking the rules.

Please do not try this at home. The dangers of linking two random texts are well known. You may be familiar with the story of a man who opened his Bible and placed his finger on a verse and read: “And Judas hanged himself.” He then repeated the process and came upon “Go and do likewise.”

Rest assured that the scriptures this morning were not randomly chosen. I am well aware of their contexts and promise not to do violence to their meaning. I expect that many of you are aware that “Blessed are the peacemakers...” comes from the Beatitudes which open Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. They describe the promise of God to those who practice a certain kind of discipleship. To those who see the world’s pain and mourn, God promises comfort. To those who make peace, God assures them that they shall be recognized as children of God.

The fruits of the Spirit are marks of those who faithfully follow Jesus and invite the Spirit of God to shape their being and activity. Paul has become aware that some in the churches of Galatia are not behaving in accordance with their faith. “These are the things you should see among you,” he is telling the church.

I don’t know if Paul intends this order of the fruits of the Spirit, but I can imagine that love and joy are prerequisites for peace. Love certainly lies at the center of Jesus’ teaching and person. Love of God and neighbor sums up the whole law, he tells us. Whether we are talking about personal or world peace, failure to love disturbs the peace. Some teenagers, unsure whether they are loved or not, are filled with anxiety and insecurity. Broken relationships, whether marriage or friendship, disturb our peace. Experiences of violence or hatred traumatize us without the loving support of others. The loss of loved ones disrupt our sense of calm.

Failure to love undermines our ability to build trust, to work through differences and ultimately to understand one another. Without love, we judge others and become complicit in the system that divides humanity by race, gender, age, ethnicity, and nationality.

In the same way, without joy, peace becomes nearly impossible. Love without joy becomes stunted. An unhappy love may be among the most tragic experiences in life, and certainly breaks apart our peace. We sometimes read in the psalms of a peace found by the psalmist in the midst of threats from an enemy. But that peace is always undergirded by the psalmist's assurance of God's love and the joy that comes of that love. These two qualities are allies of the one who makes peace. So as I talk about peace this morning, know that I am also talking about love and joy. These two set the context for peace.

Speaking of context, let me tell you something about the churches in Galatia, or more specifically Paul's concern about these churches. He's been building up to this list that we read this morning. He's concerned that they have abandoned "living by spirit" for their own wisdom. In today's language, they have traded the spiritual life for a secular one. They have ceased to be guided by the leading of God and pursued their own desires.

I was asked this past week for a definition of "spirituality." I'm not always sure how to answer this because there are so many assumptions that get in the way of our understanding. For example, we contrast spirit and body with the effect that we see religion as concerning itself with nurturing the soul. From this we limit our questions to the afterlife, the rules for getting into heaven, and prayer. This view emphasizes the separation of church and state, not mixing politics and religion. It allows us to have one ethic for church life and a different ethic for work, community and international relations. It allowed us to offer salvation to slaves without actually freeing them and to justify a host of other evils without jeopardizing our eternal salvation.

We contrast spirit and the material with the effect that we become offended when the minister starts talking about money. We contrast spirit and the world with the effect that we view the church's stand for justice as interference. The problem with any contrast is that we create a place where the spiritual doesn't belong.

Instead, we should look at "spiritual" in the way Paul does. To be "spiritual" is to be governed by the Spirit, to be led by God, to follow Christ... in all things. There is a way in which God wants us to treat our bodies. There is a way in which God wants us to use our money. There is way in which God wants us to relate to our neighbor. There is a way in which God wants us to treat the earth. That way is spiritual. Paul tells the churches that they are to be led by the spirit in all things. Peace is one of the products of living our lives in this way.

For the Christian, or any truly spiritual person, there is no secular. This false dichotomy has compromised the church's witness to the world. We have no trouble seeing ministry to those who grieve as the church's business. We allow our clergy to counsel those getting married and those struggling with marriage. We look to the church to teach morality to our children. We rely on the church to refresh us personally for the challenges we face in life. We seek out the church for our private peace.

But civil rights is just as much the business of the church. How can we say that we love our neighbor when we refuse to get involved in the struggles of people to be treated fairly? The health of the earth is the church's business. The psalmist tells us that the "earth is the Lord's." Do we not see the grandeur of open spaces and the majesty of mountains and the vastness of the oceans as the handiwork of our Creator? Do we imagine that the fate of the monarch butterfly and the Kirtland's Warbler are of no concern to God?

Christian spirituality especially centers in this verse: "And the Word became flesh...." Spirituality is about taking the gifts of God inside our hearts and minds and making them visible. It is not just about offering words of comfort to the victims of violence, but acting in ways that curb violence in the world. Violence against women, international conflict, and inequities in the justice system are of greater concern, not less, to the "spiritual" person.

So today we celebrate peacemakers not because they are practical, but because they are spiritual in the best sense of that word. Jesus tells us that they shall be called children of God. Do we not see in children something of the parents? Peace is so hard to find in this world riddled with conflict. But when God's peace is made visible by the hands of those who make peace, we witness miracle. We see God made visible, word made flesh.

Making God's peace visible is the work of the church and of the spiritual person. We do it together and individually as we follow the leading of the Spirit. We see these miracles every day in the restoration of relationships, in reconciliation between peoples, in the healing between nations. We experience it in the hugs after an accident, in the embrace after long separation, in forgiveness offered and received. Today we see it in a person teaching peace to our young men and women. May God continue to bless those who make peace visible, and may we see in their example the call of God's Spirit to love, joy, and peace.

Amen.