

Blessed are the Peacemakers

Sixth in Lenten Sermon Series on the Beatitudes

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
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by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
²Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." ¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.
²⁰This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. ²⁷The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. ²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

It is a moody day, Palm Sunday. It begins so joyfully – with a parade. And yet, even with the exuberant sounds of “All Glory, Laud and Honor,” the children processing, the congregation singing, everybody waving palm branches and happy to be here because it’s the Prelude to Easter, there is also a low rolling drumbeat of impending doom. That’s why Palm Sunday carries a second title too – “Passion Sunday”. It is a moody day – bright with the hopeful expectation of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, hailed by the crowds with accolades, the road before him covered with the peoples’ cloaks as for a king; but it’s also ominous, with hints of doom as the Pharisees raise their voices above the crowd and ask Jesus to stop their singing.

We hear whispers foreshadowing a mock trial, a change in the roaring of the crowds from “Hosanna” to “Crucify him!”; then the distant sounds of hammer hitting nails, the certain last breath and silence of death to come. This is the moodiest Sunday of the whole church year, a mixture of hopeful expectation and dashed dreams, a joyful parade turning to a path to torture.

The truth is the people in Israel had good reason for their uneasy temperament based on studies of nations and their sense of wellbeing. Just last month, the United Nations released their annual World Happiness Report, a study that determines the level of happiness of different nations, based on six key variables: freedom, absence of corruption, income, healthy life expectancy, social support and generosity. Finland is at the top of the list, for the second year in a row. How could the Fins not be happy? They boast of great food and the Northern Lights; the year round residence of Santa Claus and his reindeer in Lapland.

Interestingly, the U.N. study measures not just the happiness of native-born peoples, but also the country’s immigrants. Immigrants in Finland are the happiest in the world. The report says of the top ten countries: “They pay high taxes for a social safety net, they trust their government, they live in freedom and they are generous with each other. They care about each other; that’s the kind of place people want to live.”¹

¹ <https://Worldhappiness.report/ed/2019>

Now, affluence has something to do with the degree of happiness among people of particular nations. But there is a more striking variable. The lower ranking nations are ones which, in their history, have suffered a major defeat. The Japanese are not as happy as the Swedes. The German people are not as happy as the British. Generally, a nation's mood has something to do with the welfare of its citizens including the basic essentials for life; but a big determination of how they feel about themselves is a history of victory or defeat.

By the variables of this modern day study, at the time of Jesus, Israel was dragging the bottom of the happiness scale. Centuries before the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria. The people were carried off and the land ruined. Seven hundred years later the Southern Kingdom fell to Babylon. What semblance of dignity they still possessed was destroyed by a brutal and evil conqueror. Then, just one hundred years before Jesus, the Greeks conquered Jerusalem and brought a particularly reprehensible form of repression. They turned the courts of the Temple into brothels of immorality; they destroyed all the sacred artifacts that Israel had preserved from its days of wandering in the wilderness. To add insult to injury, the Greeks sacrificed hogs in the Holy of Holies and offered them up to the gods of Mt. Olympus.

But during those terrible days, a century before Jesus, a Hebrew general rose up who destroyed the conquering Greeks. Judas Maccabeus came riding into Jerusalem on a horse to restore the fortunes of the once noble people of Israel. It was a victory short-lived, because again, in the time of Jesus the Romans were the conquerors. They brought oppressive taxes, and quick retribution to all who dared to defy Rome. Their words declared *the Pax Romana* – but the peace of Rome was in fact a subjugation by threat of death that kept the empire quiet, and their punishment by crucifixion was no small deterrent. However, at the time of Jesus, that century-old victory of Judas Maccabeus was enough to plant a seed of hope that germinated in the dark.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, and the people cried *Hosanna, God Saves!* somewhere deep inside of them their hearts were set on this hope: that

Jesus would do for them what Judas Maccabeus had done a century earlier. They desperately needed someone to destroy their enemies, to smash the idols, and to renew God's people of ancient Israel as free, and honored, and chosen, through whom all the families of the earth would come to know God's blessing. But Jesus did not come into town as Judas Maccabeus, high on a horse, with all the regalia of military might. He borrowed a colt, that had never been ridden, and led a modest parade and the disciples and others spread their cloaks on the road before him because they had seen the power of God in Jesus. Not in acts of military might, but humble, compassionate service among those in need.

That's why when they shouted, "Blessing to the One who comes in the name of the Lord," Luke reminds us of the angels who at his birth sang, Glory to God and on earth peace, because their Palm Sunday echo returns the praise singing, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven." In Jesus Christ, heaven and earth touch the other.

From the very beginning, the reign of Jesus in the eyes of God is not about might, but about mercy. It is not about retribution and getting even. It's about redemption and gaining life. It is not about human power. It's about A God-given peace. It is about a peace so far beyond human understanding that even Jesus weeps over Jerusalem today saying, "If you, even you the City of Peace – had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace.

Blessed are the peacemakers; for they will be called children of God.

God's *Shalom* – that word from which Jerusalem takes its name is a word so rich in meaning that it takes many words to describe it. It means so much more than the absence of conflict. It means wholeness, completeness, balance. It carries the connotations of health, safety, wellbeing, security and serenity. It has such an expansive meaning actually that the Apostle Paul said the peace of God *surpasses our understanding*; and even Jesus said that the peace he gives is not as the world gives. His peace frees us from our troubled

hearts and takes away all fear.² Eric Kolbell has described God's peace in these expressive terms: "The eternal verity, the poet's muse, the prophet's grail, the lover's glint, the pilgrim's lighted trail."³

Now, we must take note that Jesus did not say: Blessed are those who have peace, or blessed are those who prefer peace, or wish for peace, or love peace, or pray for peace... Jesus said, Blessed are the peace-makers, the Greek is literally the "doers of peace." And so on Palm Sunday, as the Son of God is about to plunge into all the hellish chaos that awaits him in Jerusalem, he weeps for the children of God who think that God's peace might come in military regalia, in some magnificent parade of power and prowess.

No... the peace of God comes as Jesus came to us, in humility, and we who would find ourselves called to be his followers make peace by doing the work that Jesus did: taking good news to the poor in word and deed, binding up the broken hearted, helping the captives go free, and the prisoners find release, and proclaiming the favor – the blessing -of God.⁴

Making peace is something that requires human agency in partnership with these counter-cultural ways of God. During World War Two, there were some members of the French Resistance who were captured by the Nazis. Instead of being shot like so many others, they were sent to work in a munitions factory to make bombs. Of course they were sick at heart knowing that the bombs they were building would kill and maim the very people they had worked so hard to save. So they thought and thought, and the religious ones prayed, and as the days went by they began to stay awake at night and rip up their sheets, and newspapers, and the little bits of toilet paper they had, and scraps of books, including the Bibles and their precious writing paper. Then during the day, they would pretend to stuff the bombs with the explosives but instead they would mix and fill them with little scraps of paper

² Philippians 4:7 and John 14:27

³ Eric Kolbell, *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, p. 110.

⁴ Isaiah 61 – text of Jesus' inaugural sermon.

and fabrics, and include a little note that read: “*We are doing the best we can with what we have and where we are.*” *We are doing the best we can with what we have and where we are.*⁵

And they were, because they used their hearts and their heads and the hands God had given them. And even in an enemy bomb factory they worked for the triumph of justice toward the day of peace. Jesus and that little Palm Sunday rag-tag group of followers were doing the best they could with what they had and where they were. The events of Good Friday were already set into motion by a God-given vision that even when all the evil powers of hell come crashing down, love will win in the end, and peace will ultimately carry the day. Because the humility of God in the person of Jesus Christ is more powerful than any earthly power. Think about it: the Roman Empire is no more. But the cross of Jesus Christ is everywhere.

That cross calls us, it challenges us, to join Jesus in doing the things that make for peace among the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful and the pure in heart, the persecuted. Are we doing what we can with what we have where we are to make peace?

Blessed are the peacemakers; for they will be called the children of God.

Amen.

⁵ Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, “Who Is the Judge?”, p. 115.