

Sermon, December 5, 2021

Philippians 4:4-7

“A Peace Indescribable”

In the 5th chapter of Matthew Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”, and peacemakers are very much in need at this time.

Peacemaking, of course, takes many different forms, beginning with the need for peace among the nations of the world, and within our nation itself. There seems to be a growing tension between the more powerful countries in the world, which translates as a threat to all the countries of the world. Instead of all the jockeying for economic, political, and military dominance, the world would be so much better off if such powers would come together to address such global problems as the rapidly growing environmental crisis and the insane proliferation of that “sword of Damocles” constantly hanging over our heads, i.e., the existence of nuclear weaponry.

Likewise, there is a widening gulf between left and right within our own borders, which cannot only lead to needless violence but becomes an existential threat to democracy itself. Political differences are a simple fact of life that can become extremely dangerous when they are undergirded by fear, hatred, and a lust for power.

Related to this is the need for peace between the great religions of the world. As the late Hans Kung pointed out, - there can be no peace in the world without peace between the religions, and there can be no peace between the religions without dialogue between them. This, of course, includes the need for a deeper understanding within the various factions and denominations of the Christian church. Early on in my ministry I was very much involved in ecumenical work serving on the Vermont Conference Commission on Theology and Ecumenism, and as president of the Vermont Ecumenical Council. This put me in contact with leaders of other denominations, including the Roman Catholic Diocese, and through that I know how much can be accomplished when we are open and willing to communicate with mutual respect.

The twentieth century is known as the ecumenical century in which a lot of energy went into the search for greater unity within the church universal. A lot of progress was made in some ways, but there is still a lot more to be done. But the situation in the world today demands that the primary focus for the twenty-first century must be inter-religious dialogue. With all the religious tensions in the Middle East, and the rise of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism here and abroad, the possibility of lasting peace in the world is greatly threatened. So many of these problems are brought on by an ignorance of the other, and peace requires an openness to study and dialogue that leads to understanding. Through such open conversation we come to realize how much we actually have in common.

Closer to home we have to look to the need for peace within our communities, in our schools, and in our homes. It was predicted that the Covid-19 pandemic would lead to greater tensions between nations as some would blame others for their particular situation, and I think it has also created greater tensions on the domestic front as well. Isolation, financial burdens, differences of opinions on things such as masks and vaccinations can all lead to frustrations leading to conflict, and in extreme cases, domestic violence.

All of these problems are large and quite daunting and create quite a challenge for those who choose to be peacemakers, but as the song suggests, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." So much of this seems beyond our control, but we have within us the capacity to be the peace we desire, to be those little pebbles that when thrown into a pond create ripples that extend far beyond ourselves. And, so, becoming peacemakers requires that we begin by finding peace within ourselves.

Earlier this week I was listening to an interview with Paul McCartney, and at one point he was talking about the practice of meditation and said something about finding the calm within ourselves. I found that interesting- that our lives are often so cluttered with the debris of experience- with anxieties which Henri Nouwen likened to so many monkeys jumping around in a banana tree - but that somewhere underneath it all there is a place of calm within us - a place, perhaps likened to what Paul called 'the peace that passes all understanding'.

In this morning's reading Paul writes, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." That's a pretty tall order in this day and age, to not worry about anything, but it's all about learning more and more each day about how to place our trust in the Lord - believing that through the Spirit he will guide and lead us to find that place of calm within us and let it be a starting place for spreading peace. And, as the verse suggests, this can be largely achieved through prayer.

The Prayer of St. Francis, begins with the words "Make me a channel of your peace." In other words, we can become a vessel through which God's peace can flow outward into a tense and often violent world. And the prayer itself offers a very good approach to creating peace. It is about the choices we make - to choose to sow love rather than hate, to choose union over discord, and to seek understanding. It's about setting aside the prompting of ego for the sake of the common good.

Let us pray: Lord, make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much to seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.