

November 8, 2020

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 5:9, NRSV

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

Matthew 5:9, *The Message Bible*

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.

I write this sermon the day after voting. I wonder if this is how Jesus' followers felt on Holy Saturday, the day after Good Friday. Nothing is resolved. My heart is troubled. What was hoped for is not happening. I am not feeling the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." I believe my feelings reflect the feelings of most people on both sides of our political divide.

Pandemic, racial unrest, political divisions that seem almost insurmountable. We speak in apocalyptic terms, when talking about the events of the day. The end of the world is just around the corner. All of this, and so much more, has made us worn and weary. Feeling exhausted we are

probably not as loving toward one another as we know we should be.

These are trying times. But let's put it in perspective. What times aren't trying. Within the last 100 years: 1918 influenza outbreak; the Great Depression; World War II; Korea; Vietnam; student protests; civil rights struggle; the deaths of John, Martin, and Bobby; Nixon and Watergate. Life is difficult, is trying, often.

On the pulpit in the sanctuary and on a wall in my house are posted this saying: May your faith be bigger than your fear. Friends, this is a choice. I know, because I have to regularly remind myself to choose faith over fear.

There are lots of ways fear puts blinders on us. Veterans Day is a reminder of one of the fear blinders of my youth. I had a moral superiority confidence in my youth that war and soldiers were bad and I, a Christian pacifist, was good. I carried a prejudice against all things military as I protested the Vietnam War and later the placement of ballistic missiles in silos on German soil, not far from where Barbara and I lived at the time.

I am grateful to the veterans here at Amicable Church and those members of the armed forces, who worshipped at Amicable, for their patience in educating me about the role of the military and the fact that it is under civilian control. It seems my fear of the violence of war and the harm it visits on civilians had blinded me to the true humanity of the soldier.

This is not to say there are no "bad apples" in the military, but it was wrong of me to lump all military personnel into one evil entity. My fear, and my own righteousness, had kept me from differentiating between individuals and

policies. It is okay to demonize policies, systems, societal structures. It is a mistake to disavow the humanity of another person just because I disagree with the policies they support.

The biggest lesson I learned from the 2016 election was empathy for those on the other side of my political divide. On this Veterans Day Sunday, I wonder if soldiers have the same dilemma. The “enemy” is the state or the leadership with which our country has a violent disagreement with, not the individual soldiers. As we experienced in Iraq, soldiers sometimes forget the humanity of the prisoners. I am not judging, as I too have forgotten people’s humanity in and through my own self-centeredness.

But, what is one supposed to do? Pandemic, racial unrest, the political divide are all real; are reasons to be anxious, upset, angry. Our emotions are so pent-up it is hard not to be fearful, to lash out and blame, to demonize. Paul must have been addressing fears in the Philippian church when he wrote: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

A core tenet of the gospel message: Do not be afraid. Fear not! We need to practice recognizing how fear is motivating and manipulating us and then focus on God, giving thanks for what we have, letting go of any fear of what we might lose. It has been my experience, when I stop, remind myself of God’s presence, remind myself that this is God’s world, and take a deep breath, a calmness descends. Paul described it as a “peace that surpasses all understanding.”

When my fears threaten to overwhelm me, especially political fears, what has helped me the most in the past is

trying to live into Jesus’ teachings. In these days, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” are the most important words of Jesus for us to focus on. My job is not to verbally or physically bring in God’s reign. It is to share God’s love, as a peacemaker. What this peace-making looks like is best described in the Message Bible translation of this verse: “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.”

When we step back and see the person on the other side of our political divide, then we cannot help but see another child of God, a relative, a brother or sister. How we speak with them will change, if we truly view them as family members. Our job is to “show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.” The rest, the change we want, we must leave up to God.

It is good to be reminded that God calls us to be peacemakers on this Veterans Day Sunday, because the best way to keep the members of our armed forces safe and honor those who served in the armed forces is to make peace, not war.

In the coming weeks, months, and years it must be our calling to see the humanity, the child of God, in the person and people we disagree with. We must tear down the walls that separate and build bridges, not to change the other, but to united us in the family of God. I promise you, when you open yourself up to your opponent in this way, you will experience “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.”

I pray we all might be filled with the Spirit of the Holy One and be immersed in the peacemaker’s blessing. Amen.