

The Peace of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque,
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Philippians 4:1-9

The first church that Paul founded in Europe was in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the province of Macedonia. Philippi was located in northeastern Greece, some ten miles from the Aegean Sea. Around about the year 50 A.D., Paul and two of his colleagues in ministry, Silas and Timothy, traveled to Philippi, where they stayed for several days. The Book of Acts tells us that on the Sabbath day, they went outside the city gates to the river, where they joined a group of women who had gathered for prayer. One of the women, named Lydia, was a merchant who sold purple cloth. She was a Gentile who had been attracted to the Jewish faith and held a kind of "associate" status in the Jewish community as a "worshiper of God." Lydia listened eagerly to what Paul had to say, and after hearing him she decided to become a Christian. Once she and her household were baptized, she prevailed upon Paul and his colleagues to stay in her home. And thus the church in Philippi was born.

It was to the members of this church that Paul was writing. They had heard that Paul had been imprisoned for preaching the gospel, and they were concerned about him. So they sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to visit Paul in prison and to bring him gifts and messages of support and encouragement. Paul loved the people of the Philippian church. He longed to be with them again. But as that was impossible at the moment, Paul wrote a letter to them, to his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, to be delivered by Epaphroditus upon his return to Philippi.

From the excerpt read this morning, we learn that women were still very much in the leadership of the Philippian church. Lydia is not mentioned, but Paul names two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, who, Paul says, "have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel." Apparently, the two women have been having a disagreement, because, in the letter, Paul urges them "to be of the same mind in the Lord." He even asks a "loyal companion" to help the women resolve their differences.

Paul's advice to the Philippians? "Rejoice in the Lord always." "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Don't worry about anything. Cast your cares upon God in prayer. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

How we could use the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds in times like these: with our country in the midst of a contentious presidential election; with the coronavirus pandemic still upon us and a resurgence of new cases reaching record highs here in New Mexico; with the economic fallout of business closures and unemployment hurting more and more families; with teachers and students spending hours a day in front of computer screens struggling to teach and learn remotely; with California experiencing its biggest wildfire season ever, shattering previous records, and the Gulf Coast battered by yet another hurricane.

Rejoice in the Lord always? It feels like there is little to rejoice about these days. Don't worry about anything? How can we not worry in unsettling, uncertain times like these?

It's important for us to recognize that the peace of God refers to much more than our own personal inner peace or the general absence of conflict. Its meaning is much richer than that. For Paul and the early Christians, the peace of God referred to the *shalom* of God, *shalom* being the Hebrew word for peace found in the Old Testament.

Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown defines *shalom* as "wholeness and health, prosperity and security, political and spiritual well-being. . . . *Shalom*, in other words, is much more than the absence of war," he says, "and it is much more than 'inner' serenity, which is how Christians often try to spiritualize it. By contrast, true *shalom* is almost shockingly materialistic: it has to do with the state of one's belly, whether it is full or empty, whether it is a source of health or disease; it has to do with having adequate shelter; it has to do with a security that is physical as well as spiritual. It is very earthy. So concern for *shalom*, or peacemaking, doesn't just involve keeping us out of war (though it obviously includes that); it also involves seeing to it that people have enough to eat; that they are not undernourished or malnourished; that they can go to bed at night without fear that someone will spirit them off to prison; that the society will be so planned that there is food enough to go around; that the politics of the country (and of the world) are so arranged that everybody's basic needs are met." "Whatever enhances the well-being of the human family," Brown says, "is peacemaking, the spreading of *shalom*."

Given this broader understanding of the peace of God, we can recognize just how fitting it is that this year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the World Food Programme (WFP), the U.N.'s largest specialized agency, and the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing hunger and promoting food security.

In making the award, the Nobel Committee said on Friday that it wished "to turn the eyes of the world towards the millions of people who suffer from or face the threat of hunger. The World Food Programme plays a key role in multilateral cooperation on making food security an instrument of peace, and has made a strong contribution towards mobilising UN Member States to combat the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict."

The Nobel Committee's decision underscored the great "need for international solidarity and multilateral cooperation" among the nations of the world today. The Committee's chair, Berit Reiss-Anderson, said: "We are sending a signal to every nation [that] raises objections to international cooperation. We are sending a signal to this type of nationalism where the responsibility for global affairs is not being faced." She added: "Multilateral cooperation is absolutely necessary to combat global challenges. And multilateralism seems to have a lack of respect these days, and the Nobel Committee definitely wants to emphasize this aspect." U.N. Secretary General António Guterres echoed this message, saying that "solidarity is precisely needed now to address not only the pandemic, but other global tests of our time."

Going back to the apostle Paul, he says that the peace of God "surpasses all understanding." What does he mean by that? Well, I think that Paul is highlighting the counter-intuitive, counter-cultural nature of God's peace. It is the peace of God that says "beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks." It is the peace of God that says "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." It is the

peace of God that says, "put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." It is the peace of God that says "do not repay anyone evil for evil, . . . but overcome evil with good."

In John's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." The peace of God, the peace of Christ, offers a striking contrast to the peace of the world. God's peace does not come from the barrel of a gun. It cannot be imposed by force of arms. It cannot be bought with billions of dollars in military spending.

Martin Luther King, Jr., knew this well: "The ultimate weakness of violence," he said, "is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.... The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."

Wise words to contemplate as our deeply divided nation approaches Election Day, armed right-wing extremist groups "stand by," and the President has refused to say whether he would accept the election results or commit to a peaceful transfer of power.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, which is funded through the Peace and Global Witness Offering that we received on World Communion Sunday. Our denomination's Peacemaking Program was founded to call us back to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace -- to affirm that: "The church is faithful to Christ when it is engaged in peacemaking; the church is obedient to Christ when it nurtures and equips God's people as peacemakers; and the church bears witness to Christ when it nourishes the moral life of the nation for the sake of peace in our world."

The Peacemaking Program's founding document is called "Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling," adopted by the General Assembly in 1980. It said that "the church must struggle against the cynicism that regards [the pursuit of peace] as idealistic rather than realistic. It must find a central purpose in the intention to make peace. Peacemaking is an indispensable ingredient of the church's mission. It is not peripheral or secondary but essential to the church's faithfulness to Christ in our time."

Peacemaking is central to the gospel. And so, as Christians, as followers of the Prince of Peace, we have a responsibility to seek peace and pursue it in our own daily lives, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our nation, and in the world.

Let me conclude with the words of Paul: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, take account of these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." May it be so. Amen.