



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 4 – Proper 9 (C)

#### Peace

[RCL] 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

What do you think of when you hear the word “peace”? Many people first associate the word with internal positive emotional states like calmness, contentment, and acceptance. Others jump straight to external realities like harmony among groups of people, or the absence of it among nations. It’s a big and slippery concept – something most humans desire but few seem to experience consistently. Our faith tradition has a lot to say about peace. *Shalom* is the word in Hebrew, and it connotes well-being in every dimension of our lives. In the New Testament, the Greek word is *eiréné*. In today’s readings, both Jesus and Paul talk about peace. Instead of giving us suggestions for how to cultivate inner peace or tips for self-improvement, we hear that peace isn’t generated through our own efforts. Instead, God provides this spiritual gift to us. It is always available and always ours, even if we don’t *feel* peaceful. God’s peace is less a subjective state and more a reality, a marker of God’s new creation being expressed in and through us.

In the Gospel, Jesus sends his disciples to various towns and villages to prepare for his own arrival to those places. He sends them out with mixed messages. On the one hand, they hear a word of encouragement: The harvest is plentiful! But on the other hand: Watch out! You are being sent as sheep among wolves. No wonder the laborers are few! The disciples had to have a huge amount of trust in Jesus to say “yes” to going out among the wolves – and with such little material security. Jesus’ mission to proclaim the Good News cuts against the grain of the scout’s motto, “Be prepared,” because the Kingdom often comes to us as a surprise and as a gift we could never have prepared for.

What the disciples lack in material provisions, however, they make up for with spiritual ones. Jesus sends them with the power to heal the sick and the ability to hold on to peace in situations of real and perceived danger.

So, the disciples go out to the villages searching for strangers who are willing to share in their peace. They need not fear their peace being squandered; if the disciples put out the peace vibe and it’s received, wonderful, their healing ministry is loosed in that town! If not, their peace will return to them. Kick the dust off and move on to the next town. You’re likely to find some peace-sharers down the road.

While we may not be going from village to village healing the sick as Jesus' disciples were, we are called to show up in places where there is conflict, suffering, and need (that is to say, just about everywhere we go), and proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near, to prepare the way so that Jesus himself is made visible. That's pretty much impossible if we don't have access to the Spirit's gift of Jesus' peace, the "peace that surpasses all understanding," that Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians written from a prison cell.

It turns out Paul has a lot to say about the peace that comes from knowing the Good News, from knowing and loving Jesus. He describes it as an aspect of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that descends upon each of us in our baptism and joins us mystically to the Body of Christ and practically to the church.

Paul ends his letter to the Galatians with a summary statement: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy." Paul's passionate letter to the Galatians has been one of both castigation and encouragement. He cares so much for them, and it pains him to see the community get caught up in creating a hierarchy of who is holier than whom, who is more pious, more moral, more righteous. He argues that if the Galatians are caught up in this kind of scorekeeping, they haven't really received the Good News, the Gospel of Grace. The Holy Spirit, with her fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, has been stymied.

Paul so desperately wanted the Galatians then, and us today, to taste the fruit of the Spirit, to experience the freedom of the Gospel, to know a God who doesn't keep track of moral successes or failures, who doesn't rank us based on our piety or good works. We humans projected all kinds of schemes onto God to guarantee our sense of "okayness," our "good-enoughness," in God's eyes and in one another's. But the cross of Christ exposes the futility of all that scorekeeping: Christ died once and for all (Romans 6:10), for all people, those who are circumcised and those who aren't. Those who seem to have it together and those whose lives are an obvious mess. Those who are caught up in trying to prove their goodness and those who think they don't stand a chance at ever being good. In Romans, one of Paul's last letters, themes from Galatians are more fully developed. He wrote: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified [that is, made right] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:23-24).

When Paul commends the Galatians to follow the rule – that circumcision doesn't matter anymore, that all status games are null and void in God's eyes – then peace will be upon them, because the only status that matters is being incorporated into Christ's body. This blessing of peace describes what life can be like when we let the old scorekeeping and status games go. This isn't to suggest it's easy to do that – it is the work of a lifetime! And we do it faithfully, slowly, and week by week, day by day, by participating in the life of the church. There, the Spirit affirms through God's Word and the holy sacraments that we *are* part of the new creation, that the peace of Christ which passes all understanding is *our* peace. That may or may not lead to a subjective feeling of peacefulness, but it declares the objective reality of Christ's peace being ours.

Every now and then, God sends us people who beautifully and fully embody a spiritual quality so that we can see that quality incarnated. Think Mother Theresa and charity. Think Martin Luther King and justice. Think Peace Pilgrim and peace.

Perhaps you've never heard of Peace Pilgrim. On January 1, 1953, as the Cold War continued heating up, Mildred Lisette Norman took the name Peace Pilgrim and began a journey that continued until her death in 1981. That journey included seven crossings of our beautiful country. She took no money, no provisions at all and just walked across the United States with a tunic that said "Peace Pilgrim" on the front and "25,000 Miles on Foot for Peace" on the back. She made a vow never to ask for food or shelter, but people provided for her along the way moved by her smile, her presence, and their holy curiosity. Occasionally, she would be challenged by Christians who would point to Scriptural texts declaring that wars and rumors of war were necessary for the end time to come. "We've had enough fulfillment of that prophecy," she'd say, and then offer another prophetic vision of swords being beaten into plowshares: "Let's work to fulfill that prophecy." You can perceive the holy hope animating her words.

Most of us aren't called to such visible ministries as Peace Pilgrim, walking for decades, proclaiming the Good News of peace. Nor are most of us called to go into villages healing the sick, as the seventy were. But we are all called to be peace-sharers, wherever we find ourselves, allowing Jesus' Spirit of peace to emanate from us and find fellow peace pilgrims. And when we come to situations or relationships or communities where that peace isn't welcome, we can trust that God has someone else in mind to bring peace there. We can be sure because we know that God desires that, in the end, all share in his peace. We are free to keep moving until we find a place where our peace can be shared and we are welcome and can rest.

Rest from the drive to be seen as enough. Rest from trying to prove ourselves. Rest from all the ways we keep score. Trust that the Spirit will keep molding and forming us as we receive more and more the peace of the cross, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that Jesus gives. Amen.

***The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer** serves as the rector of Grace Church in the Mountains, in Waynesville, N.C. She has degrees from Davidson College, University of Edinburgh, and Episcopal Divinity School. In this phase of life, most of her discretionary time is lovingly devoured by small children. Her two primary spiritual disciplines are child-rearing and sermon-writing, and she is regularly humbled by both.*