

Sermon: Where can we find the Peace of God today?

“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’”

We have found ourselves in not just the past several months, but past several years, constantly praying for peace in so many places. We once were able to focus on peace for our communities and country, but that is just the tip of the iceberg now.

The Israeli-Palestine conflict, including the ongoing war in Gaza, and the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic are experiencing ongoing conflicts. There are others that don’t make the headlines though they are no less important, no less painful, and no less tragic. Some are global, some are national, and some are personal.

If these events have left us heartbroken and weeping imagine what God must be seeing and feeling; God, the Creator who entrusts us with his creation, with one another’s lives, and with his own life. Today the Creator and the created once again stand together weeping and broken-hearted.

I no longer see these tragedies as problems to be fixed or behaviors to be corrected. That approach hasn’t gotten us very far. Rather, I view them as symptoms pointing to a deeper issue. Until we are willing to deal with the deeper issue things aren’t likely to change. What is that deeper issue, well, it is the human heart.

Whether by a terrorist attack, through prejudice and discrimination against a minority group, in political campaigns, or in personal relationships, the violence and mistreatment some perpetrate on each

other arise first from an inner violence that poisons and fragments the human heart.

We need a change of heart. We need a heart at peace.

I can't help but ask, where is the peace of God today? I think that's a question many are asking. It's a question I suspect God might also be asking. While we wrestle with this question let's not project our failings and human imperfections onto God, waiting for and expecting God to fill the void and fix the problems.

This is not about God's failings or imperfections. It is ours and the blood of the victims, the tears of the mourners, and the pain of the world that are crying and begging for a different answer. Let's not give the same old answers. Let's not use the same old excuses. Let's not offer the same old solutions. Let's not meet the world with the same old beliefs.

Instead, let's number ourselves among the seventy sent to every town and place where Christ himself goes. Let's enter every house, first saying, "Peace to this house." Let's become people with hearts at peace, not at war.

Isn't that what you want for yourself? For your children and grandchildren? For your family and friends? For the world? I do. That's what I want. I think we all do. But I think we also struggle with what peace means, what it looks like, and how we attain and keep it.

If the events of today's world offer us anything it's the opportunity to rethink what peace means and reorient our hearts.

So let me ask you this. What does peace mean to you? What comes to mind when you think of peace? What does it look like? What shape does it take?

Now let me ask you this. Are you willing to let go of that understanding of peace? Are you willing to change your understanding and consider something else? Are you willing to pay the price for peace?

I am not asking about our willingness to risk the lives of our military men and women or increase the military's budget. We've already proven our willingness to do that. I am asking about our willingness, yours and mine, to change our understanding and practice of peace.

Here's why I asked that second set of questions. I think most of us have an understanding of peace that is too small and too narrow. We limit peace to a particular set of behaviors and usually they are the behaviors we expect or want from the other person.

We think of peace as an ideal to be attained and more often than not we define it as the absence or elimination of conflict. We've convinced ourselves that peace will come when this person or that group changes or stops doing something. Ultimately, we condition peace on our ability to change or control another. We let them determine whether our hearts are at peace or at war.

That's craziness and it doesn't work. The reality is that we don't have the power to change another. And when we try to do it, it is not peace we achieve but more violence. There is a reason so many of us feel powerless in the midst of our world's tragedies. We are powerless. We have no control to change another. The only person over whom we have any power or ability to change is ourselves. You and I are each

responsible for choosing whether we live with a heart at peace or a heart at war.

Jesus did not send the seventy out to change the towns and places they would go to, but to simply offer his peace. How often does Jesus instruct us to go and change other people? He doesn't. That may be our way but it's not his way.

Jesus does, however, spend a lot of time teaching us to change ourselves and our way of being towards one another. That's the change of heart that is at the core of peace.

The struggle for peace begins not between me and another but within myself. So, let's consider what a heart at peace might look like.

What if a heart at peace is about loving our neighbor as ourselves? It would mean that the other person, regardless of who she or he is, counts and matters as much as we do.

A heart at peace refuses to lump masses of unknown people into lifeless categories such as Liberals or Conservative, Muslim or Jewish, and makes them objects to be dealt with or enemies to be defeated. A heart at peace encounters everyone as a person. It looks another in the face and recognizes itself. So, tell me, what do you see when you look in the face of another?

What if a heart at peace is about loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, turning the other cheek, giving our shirt to the one who has taken our coat, and doing to others as we would have them do to us? If that's about peace I must wonder whether I really want peace and whether I am willing to pay the price. Some days my answer is yes and other days not so much. What about you?

What if a heart at peace means being merciful and not judging, refusing to throw the first stone (or for that matter the last stone or any in between), and taking care of the log in my own eye rather than the speck in the eye of another?

What if a heart at peace offers forgiveness not seven times but seventy times seven? Are we willing to do that?

What if a heart at peace means feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned? Before we can ever do that, we must first regard the life, needs, and desires of another as important as our own.

What if a heart at peace means choosing not to become and act like a wolf when we stand amid wolves? It means we must refuse to betray ourselves.

All these “what ifs” about peace are not so much describing behaviors as they are describing ways of being. Peace does not begin with our behaviors toward each other but with our way of being toward each other, our seeing each other as human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

Our behavior toward one another will be determined by our way of being toward one another. It is a matter of the heart, your heart and my heart. If our hearts are at war, it makes no difference how polite or nice we are to each other. Offering the peace of Christ is more than a friendly handshake, a warm hug, or a “How are you? It’s good to see you.” It’s the recognition of another’s existence and his or her value as a human being, regardless of whether he or she is family, friend, stranger, or enemy.

When Jesus sent out the seventy, he did not condition their offers of peace on who the recipients might be, their worthiness, what they had done, or what their response might be. Neither can we condition our offers of peace. Some will receive the peace and others will not. Either way, “the kingdom of God has come near” if our hearts are at peace.

The peace of Christ is not defined by the absence of conflict, and it is not an ideal to be attained. It is a practice to be lived every moment of every day of our lives, a continual setting of our faces to go to Jerusalem. That means practicing peace with our friends and family. It means practicing peace with our enemies. It means practicing peace with the stranger, with those who are different from us, and with those who may even scare us.

Let’s not forget that when Jesus sent the seventy, they went without a purse, bag, or sandals. Now don’t literalize that. It’s a metaphor for the baggage we carry, the baggage that continues to trip us up and deny us a heart at peace. It is the baggage of our past experiences, fears and wounds, grudges and resentments, pre-judgments and assumptions about others, old solutions and beliefs, our need to be right or better than the other, and sometimes our desire to play the victim.

So let me ask you one last question. What baggage might you need to leave behind to go into the world fully equipped with a heart at peace?

“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’” Amen