

Sermon Title: *Peace Within Us*

Scripture Readings

Matthew 5:6-9

⁶ ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of our God in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as our heavenly Lord is perfect.

Dom Helder Camara, former Catholic Archbishop of Brazil, is remembered as an advocate of liberation theology and a champion for the poor and oppressed. During a military regime, he stood for democracy and non-violence. You might not remember him, but perhaps you have heard one of his more famous quotes – he is remembered for saying, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Camara was speaking once with at a crowded church in Berkeley, California in the mid-1990s (a few years before his death), and someone in the crowd asked him, "After facing death squads, would-be assassins, corporations oppressing the poor, violent government opposition, and even hostile forces within your own church, who is your most difficult opponent?" *Who is your most difficult opponent?"*

The Archbishop did not say a word, instead he took his hand and pointed it into the air, his index finger pointed up, then slowly arched it around, until it was pointing at himself – at his own heart. "I am my own worst enemy," he said, "my most difficult adversary. Here I have the greatest struggle for peace and justice."¹

This morning as we continue our series on Peace, we turn our attention to that place that Father Camara pointed us – we turn to our most difficult opponent for peace – our own hearts. As Kathy Railsback sometimes reminds us when she is Worship Leader:

¹ Story from John Dear's book, *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action*.

*If there is to be peace in the world, There must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations, There must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities, There must be peace between neighbors
If there is to be peace between neighbors, There must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home, There must be peace in the heart.*

And so how can we be a people who seek to live peace – how can we be a people who, cultivate and grow peace in our hearts?

I. I think the first, and perhaps most difficult reality, is that this is not something I can do for you or you can do for me. For us to grow in the” perfect love” that Jesus calls us to – the love that calls us to “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us” – this is not something that can be fully gleaned and developed just by listening to a sermon (even if you have perfect Sunday morning attendance). I do believe that together we can build-up our imagination and desire to love with the love of God, I do believe that we can inspire one another and be examples to one another of ways we can love with the love of God. But, I also think it takes personal work and effort beyond these walls. It takes work to see the pain and humanity of our “enemies.” It takes work for our anger to not become bitterness, but to lead us to action. It takes work to not look at our world and simply throw-up our hands and say “What can be done?!” It takes work to not stop at blaming others and look into our own hearts. It takes dreams and imagination. It takes relationships. It takes community. It takes prayer and listening. The work of a lifetime.

II. To cultivate the peace of God, we must be a people with a vision of peace. There is an oft-quoted Proverb in Christian leadership courses and seminars, Proverbs 29:18 which, in the

King James Version says, “where there is no vision, the people perish.” Perhaps this might be better applied to the visions of love, justice and peace that God has planted within each of us – a vision to help guide us.

I know that some of you have visions of peace that God has given you that guide your lives:

- To work to stop and reverse Global Warming
- To work for peace around the world
- to work that all the homeless in our city might be seen as fully human
- to be a friend to refugees and immigrants who have come to live in our city
- to help heal people from their own trauma, so they don't transmit their hurt onto others.

These are a few of the visions of peace moving among us. I do think we all need a vision of love and peace to guide us – to sustain us no matter what the numbers might say, no matter how bad things might feel at any moment. Such a vision is not just to inspire us to work, but to also keep us from being overwhelmed, believing that we have to do everything. In April of 2017 Jenna, Anne H, and I had the pleasure of spending time with Jack and Linda Knox when we visited the US/Mexico border on a learning tour with Mennonite Central Committee – we have shared about them before. One of the beautiful things about spending a few days with them is how they say moving to the border has actually made them the most hopeful they have ever been in their lives – through focusing their vision and their work on one thing – through building

relationships with migrants, those working at economic development, and border patrol agents – this vision for one thing has helped them to be more hopeful.

Our vision/dream for peace doesn't have to be grand – it might be to get to know our neighbors; it might be to build one relationship; it might be to not yell at our children; it might be to daily pray for peace.

Let us hear some of the visions of peace among us:

**Her I read the dreams for peace that the children wrote during Intergenerational Time. These included:*

That all people might have a home

That everyone would have water and food to drink

That all animals would have food and shelter

That I might get along with my brother

That all children might have a mom and dad to love them

May we be a people guided by a vision of peace.

III. To grow as a people of God's peace, calls us to prayer – calls us to listen to the God of love.

Sometimes we have separated out “Love of God” and “Love of Neighbor” as two separate things. We sometimes think that there are acts that bring us closer to God and acts that bring us closer to neighbor. But these are intertwined and interconnected – our Christian or spiritual practices of prayer, meditation – of reading scripture and contemplation – these help

form us in love. Our marching for justice, clothing the naked, and visiting those in prisoner – these also form us in love.

When we think of the great leaders of non-violent movements: Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez – these were people of prayer and preparation. They knew they must be formed as people of love and peace, especially for love of their enemy. Gandhi spent hours in silence and meditation. King studied, he learned the ways of Gandhi and he knew he must seek to cleanse hatred from his heart and the heart of those in the Civil Rights movement. Cesar climbed the hill near his home every morning to pray and listen to God.

I have shared multiple times, one of the most beautiful stories of peace I have ever heard first hand. It came from Father Jaque, a Syrian monk who we met in Northern Iraq when we did our delegation with Christian Peacemaker Teams. Father Jacque had been captured by ISIS early – his fellow brothers he served with in the monastery are all dead or missing. And when I had the chance to ask him after all he has been through, how does he reflect on these words of Jesus that we read this morning, “to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?” His answer was this: that every time he interacted with one of his captors who was a member of ISIS, he looked into their eyes, he tried to smile, and remembered that they too were a victim of this war. He paused to see them, to see and acknowledge their pain and suffering.

Father Jacque has been formed in a life of prayer. As a monk, he went to prayer multiple times a day. I think about how his life of prayer – his life of talking with God, his life of listening to God – this prepared him to love his enemy. We might say that every day he was preparing himself to love his capture – that every day when he spent hours in prayer and silence he was

building up his heart muscle for great love capacity; he was beefing up his vision to allow him to see even a captive as one who has been made in the Divine Image.

This is always the challenge for me – the challenge to continue to form myself in God’s love and peace *through prayer and reflection*. The challenge to listen. Prayer and silence is not the dominant language of my spiritual life. Often the best I can do is while I prepare for the day or while I drive to work, I pray, “God, make me a person of your love today. God, make me a person of your love today.” Or when I am on my way to what I know will be a stressful situation, I pray, “God, make me be a person of your love today.” When I know there is someone I am struggling with, I simply pray, “God, as I interact with (insert name of person) – make me a person of your love.”

As Dr. King said, Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of Christ, is the most potent instrument in humanity’s quest for peace and security.

And so, I am going to pass out some homework – some prayers and might help us work out our heart muscles as we seek to grow in peace, as we seek to beef-up our own abilities to see the Divine Light shining in each person. I will pass around some papers for you to take, and consider trying one or some of these. The first is a meditation that Jenna has shared with me, a meditation for picturing the pain of our enemies/someone we are having a hard time with –

to breathe in their pain. And the others are some short prayers you might try repeating or singing throughout your day.²

As these come around, I am going to close with a quote from that great peace-maker, Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon, toward the end of his life, as he looked back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: “Alexandar, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him.”

The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes. But the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love is still growing. It started with a small group of dedicated followers who carried the gospel into all the world.

As a group of dedicated followers of the Prince of Peace, may we be a people who seek to work out our heart muscles – that we might be a people of vision, a people of prayer, a people of God’s peace. Amen.

² A copy of the paper I handed out is at the end of the sermon.

Forming ourselves as people of God's Peace

Tonglen (Tibetan for "giving and taking") Guided Meditation – loving our enemies

- 1. Sit or lie quietly.** Get comfortable. Take in several deep breaths until you find yourself in a centered, and relaxed place.
- 2. Close your eyes.** Imagine someone (yourself, a loved one, someone it is difficult to be around or difficult to love, someone you might consider an enemy). *Focus intently on this person and on their suffering.*
- 3. Breathe in.** As you breathe in, focus on the heaviness of their hurt, of pain they might be experiencing, and of ways they may suffer. Imagine yourself breathing in their woundedness and suffering. As you do this, picture that you are breathing in their pain (maybe in the form of a dark cloud), so you remove it from their bodies, giving them room for comfort, healing and peace.

4. Breathe out. As you breathe out, breathe happiness, ease and peace (maybe in the form of a bright light) into or toward that person. Think about what might bring them comfort or peace, and with each out-breath, breathe this into them.

5. Repeat. Continue this practice of breathing in pain and breathing out peace over and over again until your session is over.

Don't Be Afraid - Sing the Journey 105

Don't be afraid.

My love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.

Don't be afraid. My loves is stronger

And I have promised, promised to be always near.

Simple prayer of growing in love

God, make me a person of your love today.

God, make me a person of your love today.

If there is to be peace in the world

If there is to be peace in the world, There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations, There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities, There must be peace between neighbors

If there is to be peace between neighbors, There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home, There must be peace in the heart.