

“Peace Be With You”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 3, 2014

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Worship Theme for August: The Peace of Christ

Holy Scriptures: Romans 8: 26-27; John 20: 19-23

Romans 8: 26-27

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because^[a] the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

John 20: 19-23

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Become an Act of God

In yesterday's newspaper there was a short story about the actor Djimon Hounsou.

You may have seen Djimon Hounsou in "Amistad," "Gladiator" or "Blood Diamond."

He is currently starring in a new film called "Guardians of the Galaxy."

Mr. Hounsou talked about how long it took to put on the make up and costumes,

about which he said,

"Some of us completely forgot about the physicality of this story.

The costume looks great and make up looks great,

and then you realize, 'Oh goodness, I can't move much.'"

"Guardians of the Galaxy is a Marvel film, so we already know going in

that the lead characters must have superhuman powers.

Djimon Hounsou said, "Somewhere internally, we have superhuman notions at times.

It's an aspect of trying to escape your daily struggles.”

“Given the nature of this [film], [the AJ-C reporter] asked

what power he would choose if he could.

Rather than flight or invisibility or superhuman strength,

he'd choose supernatural benevolence:

‘If I could have the power to alter the world that I live in, that would be great.’”

(Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Sat., Aug. 2, 2014, P. D2)

“If I could have the power

to alter the world that I live in,

that would be great.”

Become an Act of God

There was a scholarly study made regarding the differences

in how communities respond to catastrophes.

The study determined that if the catastrophe is called an Act of God,

then people decide to work together

and, in effect, we become the acts of God.

However, if the tragedy is considered an Act of Human Error,

then neighbors tend to fight, bicker, and compete with each other

for precious resources and waste precious energy.

Floods and Storms and Tornados?

We rebuild and help one another.

Oil spills and accidents and national economic challenges?

Too often we become predatory, competitive, self-centered and selfish,

looking out for Number One rather than one another.

If you want to see the day when we come out the wilderness

and live into the Peaceful Realm of God,

then start by being a person of integrity, faithful and ethical.

Become an Act of God.

Start by letting God use you to be a peacemaker.

Become rich soil for God's seeds of peace.

The seeds of peace are already planted with us.

In the fullness of time and by the grace of God,

Jesus Christ comes to you and stands before you and says to you,

as he said to the Disciples to believers and doubters alike –

“Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:21-22)
Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers,

for they shall be called children of God.” (Matthew 5)

Jesus said, “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.
I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace.
In the world you have tribulation;
but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Accepting and living out peace, like love, is a hallmark of being a disciple of Christ.

The peace Christ provides overcomes fear.

The peace Christ provides is a gift of presence.

The peace Christ provides is a balm of healing for the broken.

Jesus Christ provides the gift of peace that God has dreams into reality.

A while back I visited First Christian Church in Tullahoma, Tennessee.
On a coffee cup found on the kitchen shelf I saw a drawing of a woman,
who says:

“The two things I want the most are world peace and thin thighs.
Actually, I don't care that much about world peace.”

Become an Act of God.

Become a bearer of the peace of Christ.

The peace that God gives to the world,

planted in us by Jesus Christ,

nurtured by the Holy Spirit,

fosters and grows in the context of community.

Cicero in 49 B.C.E. said, "He plants trees to benefit another generation."
Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson had been retired for many years

when he instructed his gardener to plant fruit trees Acheson had just purchased.

The gardener hesitated, saying,

"But, sir, it will be many years before they bear fruit!"

"Well, then," replied Dean Acheson, "we had better plant them this afternoon."

Become an Act of God.

Become a bearer of the peace of Christ.

Children are God's sign that the world should go on.

Yet today one does not need to look very hard to see children in the midst of conflict.

They are the number one victims of poverty, civil unrest and strife.

They are the first to suffer

and oftentimes children are forced to carry military weapons

and serve as soldiers and mine sweeps in the battles being waged

in the streets and hillsides around the world today.

Adolescents in gangs across the American landscape carry weapons no less deadly or dangerous to themselves and to their neighbors.

What positive, life affirming alternatives are present?

Who is called to plant seeds of peace?

Deep down inside we know who is called:

God calls forth the same community of faith which Ezekiel spoke for

when he prayed in a valley of dry bones.

God calls forth the same community of faith to whom Jeremiah testified

when he bought acreage in the barren land of his ancestors.

God calls forth the same community of faith to whom Peter assured

that even in the midst of extreme suffering they were to be a living hope

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3-4)

God calls the same community of faith who can look at a cross in a Good Friday world

and see the Good News of Easter dawn.

God calls forth the same community of faith that remembers

we partake of an ordinary loaf of bread and a cup of wine

and experience an extraordinary new life and new covenant.

You see, my friends, we are the community of faith in Jesus Christ that God calls to become Acts of God, to become bearers of the peace of Christ.

The Church with a capital C has already received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

With the gift of the Holy Spirit comes the social responsibility

to offer the youth of the world positive, realistic and affirming

alternatives to violence and self-destruction.

The church is the body best suited to scatter and plant seeds by the handfuls,

with a prayer that some seeds might find good soil

and produce a living crop of forty, sixty, even a hundredfold.

Become an Act of God

Each summer for the past 20 years

"Seeds of Peace" is the name of a camp held in rural Maine.

Dozens of teenagers from Israel, Palestine, and Egypt

and a wide range of conflicting nations

come together for a summer of camping, hiking, canoeing,

and personal engagement.

Think about it.

There are no real opportunities in the Middle East

for anyone who is an Israeli and a Palestinian to sit down and talk

and then go camping, toast a marshmallow, pick up some poison
ivy,

and see each other not as enemies and strangers

but as friends with names, families, pimples, jump
shots,

with unique strengths and weaknesses.

James Russell Lowell said, "Folks never understand the folks they hate."

We fear what we do not understand.

Once we understand something, or someone, there is no longer any need
for fear.

Math anxiety is very common experience.

However once a student learns the theorems of geometry and the
equations for algebra,

the field of mathematics is demystified.

People are the same way.

In this war torn and conflicted world, what can we do to demystify strangers?

Out of the Seeds of Peace camp there emerged a true and sure friendship

between Joachim and Amal (not their real names).

Both boys were 14,

both only live a few miles apart,

both have many of the same interests.

Joachim is an Israeli Jew and Amal is a Palestinian Moslem.
They returned to their separate homes and communities in Israel,

just miles apart physically yet light years apart politically.

Joachim and Amal talked every day on the phone.
In their middle schools, each boy is the only student

to have a friend from the other side, if you will.

Joachim says that his friends say bad things about "all Arabs,

but I tell my friends about Amal;

I tell them that all Arabs do not hate and throw stones at Jews.

Amal will never throw a stone at anyone."

Amal will never throw a stone at anyone.

Joachim and Amal have each Become an Act of God

What does it take to bring all the people of the world together,

to go camping together, to sing songs together, to work together,

to break bread together, to share the cup of life together?

What does it take?

It has already been done.

In Ephesians 2:14, Paul wrote,

“For Christ is our peace,

who has made us both one,

and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”

God has already given us all the tools we need,

all the hope that is necessary,

all the components necessary for world peace.

God has already broken down the walls that divide.

God has given the world peace.

God has offered and planted in us the seeds of peace, the gift of shalom.

Jesus said, “Peace be with you.”

Christ's words are more than a blessing;

his words are a commission, a message of empowerment.

“Peace be with you!”

We are commissioned by the Word, by the waters of our baptism, by the love of Christ

to take this peace, this shalom, this gift of wholeness and community,

everywhere we go and in everything we do.

Become an Act of God.

Some folks pine and ponder, wish and wonder about,

“If I could have the power

to alter the world that I live in,

that would be great.”

Tell them.

Remind one another.

Convince yourself:

“I am an Act of God.

In Jesus Christ,

we have the power to alter the world,

and it will be great.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.