

Peace Works: A Spring-Into-Life Worship Series for Such a Time as This

Sunday, May 5	-- Meeting the Holy at the Table -- Aloha
Sunday, May 12	-- Interwoven into the Body of Christ -- Ubuntu
Sunday, May 19	-- Act Out Love, Like a Good Samaritan -- Si Se Puede
Sunday, May 26	-- Jacob, Esau & Conflict Resolution -- Shalom
Sunday, June 2	-- Emptying Oneself is Most Fulfilling -- Agape
Pentecost, June 9	-- Pentecost Spirit is Engaging -- Heiwa
Sunday, June 16	-- God's Long-Term Plan for Peace -- Aloha

"Peace Works: Jacob, Esau & Conflict Resolution -- Shalom"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 26, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 27: 18-29; Matthew 18: 15-22; 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8

Genesis 27:18-29 (NRSV)

¹⁸ So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." ²⁰ But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me success." ²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²² So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. ²⁴ He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." ²⁵ Then he said, "Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." ²⁷ So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed! ²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. ²⁹ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

Matthew 18:15-22 (RSV)

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (RSV)

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; ⁵ it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

Sermon

Our word for the day and for our life together is Shalom.

Shalom, a Hebrew word meaning wholeness, peace,
is both the way to peace and the way of peace.
We have explored in worship the pathways to peace
that begin with listening, with friendship, with acting like a good neighbor.

Today, in this sacred and safe space, we are going to address conflict resolution.
Peace is planted and grows when we bless one another with the gift of shalom.
Shalom is a traditional Jewish greeting,
as well as a word for departures,
wishing the blessing of peace upon one another.
I often end my letters and texts with the word shalom.
Recently a new acquaintance sent back a text
and called me Mr. Shalom, thinking that was my name.
I’ve been called worse.

The late Pat Conroy wrote a number of fine books,
including The Great Santini, Conrack, Prince of Tides, and The Losing Season.
Pat Conroy shared a personal story of when he was young
and his mother read bedtime stories to him and his little sister.
A memorable book she read to her children was The Diary of Anne Frank.
As Pat listened to the entries of Anne Frank’s diary, he fell in love with her.
He thought, *I am so much more worthy of her than that boy she speaks of,
for I know and understand her.*

Why must she hide? Why can't she be free, she is so beautiful?

And suddenly, just like that, she was gone,
the book suddenly over, no more entries.
You see, in 1944, the Frank family was arrested and placed in concentration camps.

Mrs. Conroy closed the book and said,
*"I shared this with you because I want you children to be the kind of people
who will hide Jews and anyone in need of protection."*

Well, the very next day, there was a knock at the door
and a neighbor was there on the Conroy's doorstep.
Pat and his family knew the neighbor was Jewish;
as soon as his little sister threw open the door and saw who it was
she reached out and grabbed his hand
and exclaimed, *"I will hide you! I will hide you!"*

She understood the meaning of shalom,
of wanting God's peace to be feasted upon someone in her community.

What a delightfully coincidence that in our Peace Works worship series
today's theme – conflict resolution –
falls on the Sunday before Memorial Day.

Yet in so many ways it's most appropriate.
Tomorrow our Nation will pause to memorialize
all those who sacrificed their lives for the land they loved and served.
Originally established to remember those who served and died in the Civil War,
Memorial Day has become a time set aside to give thanks
and say a prayer of gratitude for all who paid the ultimate price.
Tomorrow on Memorial Day, friends and families will set awhile,
burgers will get flipped,
ballgames will be played and watched.

Come on out for the Slip 'N Slide in our church park at 10 tomorrow morning,
clean fun we are offering to kids of all ages to the wider community
as they slide on sheets of plastic covered with no-tears shampoo.

A water balloon or two may get tossed;
soapy bubbles will float and dance and fill the air.

Whatever you are doing tomorrow, wherever you are,
I imagine that each of us will make time to stop, to pause and give thanks,
to remember the men and women who gave all they had
so we – you and I and all our neighbors –
might live in peace and peacefully live.

Conflicts make us want peace.

World War I, which ceased with the Treaty of Versailles in 1918,
was called The Great War, the War to End All Wars.

It started in 1914, ended in 1918.

The total number of military and civilian casualties...were about 40 million:
estimates range from 15 to 19 million people died,
and about 23 million military personnel were wounded.

Two years later soldiers' bodies were still being returned to their homelands.
In 1920, the President of the United States stood on a dock at Hoboken, New Jersey.
President Harding watched as caskets containing the bodies of soldiers slain in France
were brought ashore and covered the dock.
He was heard to say, *"It must never happen again."*

War – and seeing the sad results of senseless violence – has that effect on us;
at least, it should have that effect on us,
unless we are too numb to feel the pain, the loss, the need for shalom.
Violent conflicts should strengthen our resolve
that each conflict must be the last,
deepen our resolve to make the most recent
violent episode, battle, war be the last,
to be the one to end all episodes, battles, wars.
May the world overhear the Church proclaim, *"It must never happen again."*
Lord, help us to ensure such a fate awaits no more sons or daughters,
fathers or mothers, sisters or brothers, children of God one and all.

Soldiers know a lot about preparing for conflict, about fighting and waging war,
yet many warriors, having experienced brutality,
seek pathways for shalom, for peace, for wholeness and healing.

At the close of World War II, General Douglas MacArthur observed,
*"We have had our last chance.
If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system,
Armageddon will be at our door.
The problem basically is theological and involves a spiritual recrudescence
[the recurrence of a condition]
and improvement of human character.
...It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh."*

Eisenhower, a 5 Star General and President, was on a similar wavelength when he said,
*"I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can,
only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.
...Though force can protect in emergency,
only justice, fairness, consideration and cooperation
can finally lead [people] to the dawn of eternal peace."*

The Church, founded by Christ, gifted with the Holy Spirit, guided by Holy Scriptures,
is called to be a witness

and to lead the whole people of God
"to the dawn of eternal peace."

May we do so by reminding the world that all people are holy,
all are divinely blessed and a blessing,
that everything God created and creates is sacred.

Thus inspired, the author of Silver Surfer testified,
*"If sacred places are spared the ravages of war...
then make all places sacred.*

*And if the holy people are to be kept harmless from war...
then make all people holy."*

--J. Michael Straczynski, Silver Surfer: Requiem

-
Peace is something offered and received.

As with *aloha*, it is a spirit and a commitment.

When we say shalom to one another we acknowledge one another's holiness.

What happens when we don't?

When we fail to let shalom be our ways and means,

what do you think goes on, carries forth, rushes pell-mell into the future?

How does our story end when shalom is lacking?

How about when it's ever-present?

Shalom seems to be a missing link, if you will, in the story of Jacob and Esau.

The Bible speaks of the holiness of all people,

and our fragility and vainglory as well,

which are evident in these chapters in Genesis.

As you hear the story of Jacob and Esau,

imagine what might have been

if they had stopped and wished one another the gift of shalom.

Isaac and Rebekah had twin boys, Esau and Jacob.

Esau was born first, but Jacob was holding on to his brother's ankle at birth,

both sons wanting to be first, the eldest,

to be the one to be blessed and to rule the other.

Esau grew to be hairy and strong, an outdoorsman and hunter.

Jacob stayed closer to home, around the tents, and was his mother Rebekah's favorite.

When their father Isaac was close to his last days on earth, nearly blind,

he told Esau it was time for his blessing,

but first to catch and prepare meat for his supper.

While Esau hunted for dinner, Rebekah tipped off Jacob.

They quickly cooked some meat,

then put Esau's clothes on Jacob and lambskins over his arms.

As you know, Jacob means to supplant, or a trickster.

While Esau hunted, Jacob tricked Isaac,
pretending to be his older brother so he would get blessed.
What is the fall out, the consequence of using treachery
to gain the promise of a bright future?

*Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said,
"The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."
²³ He did not recognize him,
because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him.
"May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.
²⁹ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"*

Alas, while the trickery and treachery worked,
the blessings gained came at a great personal cost.
Trust, once broken, is not easily restored.
Trust.
In the business world,
they say that it takes a lifetime to build trust and only a minute to lose it.
We people of the Spirit affirm that whenever and however trust is broken,
in Christ we receive the gift of healing hurts and fostering forgiveness.
Grace is free, but not cheap.

There is no cheap grace to be found in the story of Jacob and Esau.
Esau was told by Isaac he would serve his younger brother.
Afraid for his life, unable to benefit from the blessing,
Jacob fled his home and homeland.
The trickster got tricked by Laban into marrying Leah before Rachel,
and had to work for his father-in-law for years and years.

In time, as he matured, Jacob the supplanter had spiritual awakenings.
He dreamed of a ladder from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending.
He awoke with a deepening sense of the presence of God in his life.
Before he could make peace with Esau, however,
Jacob first had to look within and find peace in his own heart.

One evening he stayed up all night, wrestling with an angel of God,
demanding a divine blessing.
God disguised as an angel renames Jacob, calling him Israel,
meaning "one who struggles with God."
Struck in the hip,
a limping Jacob came to see that spiritual blessings of God

are a gift that matters more than stolen ones.

Jacob came to a decision:

it was time to reconcile, to make peace with his brother.

Only after he sees himself as a blessed child of God

does Jacob seek to return home, to face the music, if you will,
to reconcile and resolve his conflict with Esau.

Jacob must first forgive himself, and then seek his brother's forgiveness.

Only then does Jacob learn that his older brother whom he supplanted
had already forgiven him long, long ago.

Esau had moved through and past their childhood pains and differences.

Esau had not allowed past pains and losses and grievances

to dictate or direct or divert his current livelihood or future with God.

When the two finally meet again,

they collapse into each other's arms, weeping with relief and joy.

I would like nothing better for the story to end here,

with a happily ever after,

with shalom ruling the day and the night.

However, "in the end, the brothers reconcile their past,

but Jacob is still aloof and goes his own way from Esau.

[Their] reconciliation does not eliminate...future conflict.

The descendants of Esau, the Edomites,

...conflict with Jerusalem throughout the scriptures,"

throughout our common history,

our shared story as God's own.

And so we see from a distance,

with wisdom born of experience,

that it is never too early, and it is never too late,

and it is always right on time

to express and wish the shalom of God

to another living soul.

Christians, Disciples of Jesus Christ,

we must not abdicate our social responsibility

to work for peace, to seek after the ways of justice,

to build and foster community,

to welcome the Holy Spirit as it courses through our veins and words and actions.

When young Pat Conroy listened to Anne Frank,

he was a boy admiring and imagining a far away girl,

born in another time and place.
85 years ago, concealed in an attic, hiding and scared, brave and bold,
Anne Frank, 14 years old, wrote in her diary on July 15, 1944:

"That is the difficulty of these times:

*ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us,
only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered.*

*It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals,
because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out.*

*Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything
I still believe that people are really good at heart.*

*I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation
consisting of misery, confusion and death.*

I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness.

I hear the ever-approaching thunder which will destroy us, too.

*I can feel the suffering of millions
and yet if I look up into the heavens,
I think that it will all come right,
that this cruelty too will end,
and that peace and tranquility will return again.*

*In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals,
for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."*

– Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl, 1947.

Perhaps... perhaps...

We have this hope, because we have this shalom.

All Power Be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!