

July 6th: The Fruit of Peace

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We’ve been looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we’re studying the fruit of peace–and learning about what we can do to bring peace to our communities. So we’re glad you’ve joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next couple of months.

Before we begin this discussion on peace, let’s take a moment to pray together.

God of Shalom, from the beginning of time, you envisioned our world as a safe and nurturing place for all of your beloved creations. You spoke into being an environment where all things coexisted, and all beings were valued. In this peaceful setting, you formed us for deep relationships and connection to our natural home, and you desired for us to be good stewards of these resources. In our brokenness, we have fractured this perfect system, and now we long to return to that first reality of all encompassing serenity and harmony. Speak to us this morning, and call us to be shepherds of peace in our communities, laboring little by little to restore the tranquility and mutual support that we were designed for. Through your wisdom, we commit ourselves to this holy work as we enter a new week. Amen.

Imagine you turn on your TV this afternoon, and you see the following scenes: children being forcefully taken away from their parents and guardians, large-scale generational poverty, massive protests, and a president watching over an ostentatious parade.

Are you watching the news from the past few weeks, seen here, or are you watching the 2012 film, *The Hunger Games*?

I don't draw these parallels to necessarily assert that we are currently living in a Hunger Games like scenario, but to illustrate that both our personal reality and the media that we've been trained to consume are more similar than they might appear on the surface. There's some debate about whether violence in our fictional media causes more violence in our personalities and actions, or if inherent violence inside of us results in violent media—but I think that's kind of a “chicken and egg” scenario—we could go round and round for hours and still not really have a good answer. But when both our daily lives and the movies and TV we watch are both full of violence and injustice, the real question is: why is this the case? Why is peace so difficult for us as human beings? Why do we find peace so hard to achieve in our daily lives, and so hard to imagine in our fictional ones?

Well, our faith has an answer to that, but first, we'll need to rewind all the way back to Genesis, at the very beginning of our Bible, before this became an issue. In the creation narratives, we read that God formed all natural environments, all animals, and all human beings to exist in perfect harmony. Everything was connected together in a perfect state of interdependence and safety, and these relationships were without conflict or confusion. And this was on purpose—God created this peace, this “shalom” as the original condition of the world. In Hebrew, shalom doesn't just mean peace, it means a totally whole and rightly ordered system—so it's not just the absence of violence or the minimization of competition, it's a totally different way of being and interacting with others. In God's ongoing vision for shalom, the world thrives on mutuality, because each person and thing is perfectly placed and supported by other people and things. There's no need to dominate, or exclude, or subjugate, because this sense of shalom values the dignity of each individual person and allows them to live in a way that brings about complete flourishing.

However, if you read further into Genesis, you'll see that this original state of goodness was disrupted by brokenness—humans rejected this order and safety in favor of deceit and then shame. But while Adam and Eve were hiding from God, God was still searching for them. God was still looking to be connected to

them. This is the reason that thousands of years later, Jesus became human himself, he came to get close to the creation that was so beloved. Jesus' ministry and message offered a restoration of that original vision for the world, and offered a renewed sense of peace to humanity. And in this letter to the Galatians, Paul reiterates the importance of this good news: yes, the gospel is about personal salvation and forgiveness, but it's also about something bigger—a cosmic transformation towards shalom that touches every living thing.

Despite this, human beings were and are still fighting against those impulses that created our brokenness in the first place. In Paul's time, he called out all kinds of sin and temptations—twisting the gospel to suit human needs, hypocrisy within certain communities, and things like drunkenness, idolatry, factions, and selfish ambitions. And in our own time, there are plenty of behaviors and systems that prevent human beings from thriving as they were intended. We have institutions and policies based on evil ideologies like racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia. We pass legislation that removes vulnerable people from programs that support their physical health and wellbeing. We allow emotions like hatred and fear to lead us to kill and harm each other, and we drift into apathy when the state of the world feels too overwhelming.

And I get it, our lives right now feel more complex and confusing than most of us can handle. We are up against forces and systems that feel way more powerful than we'll ever be. Beauty queens might talk about world peace, but that reality feels so far away that we can't even imagine it.

So what are we supposed to do? Are we actually able to create peace in our current context?

I don't know about you, but my faith says the answer is yes, even on the days when my brain is telling me to give up. My faith says that like Pastor Heather mentioned last week about joy, peace is our birthright, it is God's desire for all of humanity. It's not just a nice dream, but a promised reality, and I want us to

hold onto that promise when times get tough. But before I give us some practical tips about how to identify and realize this peace in our own families, neighborhoods, and nation, I want to make an important distinction, one that takes us back to the topic of The Hunger Games.

In that fictional world, there is a national force called the Peacekeepers, and that name is intentional. They are called Peacekeepers because they are stationed in each district to maintain a certain level of neutrality—they prevent the citizens from revolting against the injustice they are experiencing and subdue them if there is any outcry or outright conflict. But they're not there to actually bring about true peace, they're present to keep the nation in a cycle of controlled hostility, making sure that certain people are protected and others are marginalized. They're not there to foster reconciliation or bring about a better, more ordered system, but to enforce laws and restrictions that keep people separated and opposed to one another. The Peacekeepers aren't present to do the work of liberation and healing, but to be agents of a kind of power that enslaves and abuses.

So when Paul is talking about peace as a fruit of the spirit, I want to be clear that he's not calling the church to be "peace keepers" in the Hunger Games sense or in the literal sense. He's not asking these leaders to support and protect institutions and cultural norms that wrongly harm their fellow human beings. He's not calling these early Christians to be people who avoid difficult conversations or people who reject righteous outrage about injustice. Those early Christians were called to stand up to the forces of empire, they were instructed to fight back against kings who lived in lavish palaces while vulnerable people went hungry in the streets.

And the same goes for us! Paul is not inviting us to maintain the status quo of our modern culture or just prevent conflict from happening at any cost. Paul doesn't want a Church that keeps the peace at the expense of marginalized communities or individuals. Paul isn't inviting us into a faith that ignores injustice. Paul isn't a leader who is interested in creating a world where some

people thrive while others suffer, and we shouldn't be about that kind of world either.

Instead, the gospel of Jesus is about the intentional work of "peace making." Unlike "peace keeping," "peace making" involves getting to the root of the issue and naming the divisions or brokenness that are causing harm. Peacemaking is a way of relating to each other that brings people back into relationship, even when reconciliation is hard or involves conflict. Peacemaking takes apart systems of oppression and injustice so that all of God's beloved children can thrive as intended. Peacemaking addresses the inequalities that we've created and finds ways to build a stronger, more mutually beneficial society. Peacemaking actually brings about the shalom that our creation narrative, Jesus, and Paul are talking about.

You might be asking, what does it look like to be a peacemaker in my daily life instead of a peacekeeper?

Well, first you might have to notice if there are ways that you've intentionally or unintentionally been keeping the peace rather than creating it. That could look like defaulting to people pleasing behaviors or appeasement in your personal relationships, or a sense of passivity or ignorance when it comes to larger societal issues. Be honest with yourself about times when you've accepted a cheap version of peace for the true shalom that you're wired for.

Once you're committed to peacemaking, that work could start small: it could be confronting an unhealthy family dynamic and making a plan for changing it, it could be hashing out a disagreement with a coworker or friend and clearing the air, or it could be apologizing to someone that you've hurt in the past. That last one is on your Fruit of the Spirit Bingo card! This kind of peacemaking adds up to families with strong relationships, friendships that are mutually supportive and encouraging, and individuals who are not afraid to speak up if something in our world is broken.

Peacemaking could take aim at some bigger issues too: you could advocate for a cause that you care about, or volunteer with an organization who is doing something meaningful in our community. You could join a local anti-war or anti-genocide protest, or champion a change in our city that would benefit our neighbors. You could educate yourself about the impacts of systems of oppression like racism, and make a commitment to calling out discrimination when you see it. You could learn more about how to protect our immigrant siblings, and fight for their right to due process and legal status in our nation.

If you need a role model, I recommend learning more about the Jesuit priest and martyr Father Oscar Romero, who was known for his work in the city of San Salvador, where he encountered widespread injustice and the violence that led to the Salvadoran Civil War. He witnessed the death squads and human rights violations occurring in his homeland, condemned the excesses of the upper classes, and spoke out against abuses of power in the Church and State. Prior to his assassination, his ministry embodied these words from Pope Paul VI, “if you want peace, fight for justice.”

Or to make this a little more personal: think of someone you admire who has strong relationships with family and friends. Do you know someone who is good at asking for forgiveness when they mess up? Do you know someone who is quick to take accountability for their mistakes and does the work to repair trust when it is broken? If you follow their example, could you make an intentional effort this week to do the same? Instead of avoiding conflict or harboring resentment, could you be vulnerable with someone and express a desire for honest dialogue and reconciliation? It’s true that none of this individual peacemaking will win you a Nobel Peace Prize, but it’s still important, faithful, and transformative work. Each time we forgive, each time we rebuild trust, and each time we move towards reconciliation, we are one step closer to the shalom that God has designed us for.

To close, I’ll say this: peacemaking on any scale is not going to be easy. It will be uncomfortable to step out of our comfort zones or break the habit of simply keeping the peace in our relationships. Our larger culture is full of obstacles to

true harmony, and human brokenness means that we will need the power of the Holy Spirit to make peace possible. We will need God's help to guide us. We will need Jesus' courage to lead us. And so I offer these words of encouragement, from his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

My friends, as disciples of Jesus and beloved children of God, peacemaking is our sacred work. We are invited into this divine task in our own unique ways, and we join God in making all things new. So as you start a new week, and you think about all the injustice and violence and evil that you witness, know that any attempts at repair are faithful. As you engage with your loved ones, and work to better our community, know that any steps towards wholeness and liberation are holy. As you think about how you feel called to bring peace to our world, know that even small, individual acts add up to a more real and permanent sense of shalom for us all.

May your peacemaking be blessed, dear ones, go in peace.
Amen.