



BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

EPHESIANS 2:14-17 AND MATTHEW 5:9

PASTOR ROBYN HOGUE

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As part of my preparation for this World Communion and Peacemaking Sunday I went to the Presbyterian Missions website to learn a bit more about the use of the Peacemaking Offering, and since the Ephesians passage I just read mentions making peace with those who are far off, I chose to learn about how the offering is used East Africa. We already have mission partners there in Malawi and in Kenya, but I chose to learn about how the offering is used in South Sudan. I learned that after decades of political upheaval and warfare, division, violence and unrest, a famine began to take hold on the region in 2015 further complicating life for those living in the area. People have been displaced and made refugees by starvation, political unrest, and violence. As of September 2020, the United Nations reported over 2,257,000 refugees had fled their homes and have been forced into refugee camps to live side by side despite significant ethnic or political differences.

While on the presbyterianmissions.org website I learned about Leisa Wagstaff who serves the Sudanese refugee populations. She sees her work to be supporting the people of these forced communities as they try to reconcile their differences and come to an understanding that allows them to live with each other in this impossible situation. The work that Leisa is doing is helping a broken community find peace, reconciliation, and unity. In her own words Leisa tells us, "I have been given the opportunity to help further proclaim the Good News and use all of my educational training and all of my varied experiences of working and living in Africa as I serve alongside the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan."

Her work is needed because the majority of the adult population in South Sudan has no formal education due to the unrest, and 70 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 17 have never set foot inside a classroom. The ongoing recruitment of child soldiers, childhood marriage and gender-based violence are all factors that are still contributing to the problem. Girls comprise only one-third of the country's student population, and the dropout rate for girl students is among the highest in the world.

Presbyterian Christians have been involved in the region for more than a hundred years and it is home to many faithful people. Leisa made her first visit there as a college student enrolled in a work-study travel program. Like many college students, she was drawn to international study because she wanted adventure. She writes, "Touching down in Sudan, however, was the beginning of much more than gaining academic credit; it began a lifelong commitment to global mission that has taken me to wonderfully diverse communities where churches are growing at astonishing rates and Christians are sustaining their faith in the midst of innumerable socio-economic, political and climatic challenges, and, often, religious persecution." And our gifts to the Peacemaking Offering make a difference for Leisa.

And while thousands of miles separate Leisa from Presbyterians in the United States, she tells us that we are never far from her mind. She writes, “I serve as your representative, your mission co-worker, and the embodiment of your desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ in every corner of the earth.” Thank you Leisa. Your work helps us understand what Paul was saying to the Christians in Ephesus.

In his letter, Paul engaged the fledgling Church in a conversation of unity and reconciliation between Jewish convert Christians and Gentile convert Christians. The early church, not just in Ephesus, but in many parts of the newly forming Christian world, was learning how to understand its identity. While it had been long settled that people of deeply different cultural backgrounds, were to be integrated into the same Christian communities as equals, the implementation was where the struggle was most difficult. After all, it’s one thing to say that we are looking to be inclusive across dividing lines, but it is a different thing to begin to do it.

The Jewish convert Christians of the early church were used to lives that revolved around differentiating themselves culturally from the Gentiles. They held themselves apart from those they called “the Others.” To bring those “others” into “their” new community was a struggle. And it is in this context that Paul reminds the churches reading his letter: “Christ is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one . . .”

It is nothing less than the very body of Christ that brings us together, and Christ’s life and death are what lead us to live in peace together. Paul drives this point home when he says that through Christ, we must not only be made into one, but we are to be *reconciled*. (verse 16) We’re called to more than calming down, being nice and co-existing; we are called to be reconciled and unified. Those who are far away—meaning those people of different tribes and communities, of differing opinions and historic divisions—are to be reconciled to one another.

This call to peace and equity is one that goes far beyond the early Christian communities of so long ago. Today, God’s Spirit gives us the power to claim them for our communities today. God’s Word gives us a challenge that makes us aware of our shortfalls as a church, but this same Word of God gives us a goal toward which to can work. We are not yet where we need to be. We’ve got work to do. We’ve come to the work late. But we’re here now. And Skyline is moving in the right direction. We know that to extend the peace of Christ will take more than just coexisting or coping with the existence of others; rather the peace of Christ will call on us to be and become a community that welcomes cultural diversity, racial diversity, generational diversity, gender diversity, identity diversity and ability/disability diversity into integral participation at every level of our church and knowing that, without them, our life would be incomplete. The first century Church shocked the Roman world by its willingness to make peace between outsiders and insiders. To work for peace in a way that is worthy of our New Testament lineage, we will need to admit our fault in past experiences that were hurtful, extend grace and seek forgiveness for what was inflicted. To work for peace in a way that is worthy of our New Testament lineage is to be committed to working through existing problems.

Peacemaking will always be an active process, one that can be intense and hard. It will take energy and persistence. It will take Christ in us because we cannot do this on our own. Christ will lead us into moments when Christ’s peace is shared, and Christ’s love is proclaimed. His peace will be shared with people from opposing sides of history and of seemingly competing lifestyles.

As Christ is our peace, we are to follow His example. Our working for peace and reconciliation must then be demonstrated in everything we do. It is demonstrated in our support of ministries like those

of Leisa in South Sudan, working to reconcile communities in tension living in refugee camps. It is in training leaders to de-escalate violence in communities wrestling with racism here at home. It is in the work of our presbytery to establish Hagar's Community Church among the women of the Washington State Correctional Facility at Purdy. And it is in the work that our congregation does to serve those within our own reach—to feed a peanut butter and jam sandwich to those without housing while we work with Associated Ministries to find long term housing solutions in our city. It is to come alongside and stay alongside through all the ups and downs of the Beacon Youth Center and our mission partner, Jake Nau, as he serves 15-25-year-olds who are living on our streets this weekend. It is to be a peacemaker in our families and in the family of Skyline.

Becoming a peacemaker means we might even begin to ask, “Why do we intentionally avoid conversations during holiday gatherings with relatives whom we find unreasonable? Why are certain ‘hot topics’ off the table at Thanksgiving? Perhaps you, like me, are ready to participate in a 90-minute webinar called *The Language We Use: Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*, hosted by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. (You can sign-up today by asking Tracy for the link and she will forward you the registration link.)

The proclamation of Christ's peace is an incredible message that inspires hope and wholeness. And as we approach the Lord's Table for World Communion Sunday, this message comes to a peak. We gather before a table where Christ's body is offered to all and Christ's peace is shared. We gather before a table, remembering the life and death of Christ that has reconciled us with God and with one another. We look forward to that day in eternity when all will be gathered—from North and South, from East and West—for that wonderful feast. We recall that all those who will be gathered, from far off and from nearby, are part of this family and are those with whom we will be fully reconciled. As we gather before this table, we are reminded of the peace toward which we work, the peace that each of us will one day experience in the fullness of time and at the shalom of that final day.