

Grounded in Worship: "Pass the Peace"
Matthew 5:21-26
August 30, 2026
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Worship Question: What does it mean to seek reconciliation with someone?

The sermon title for today is "Pass the Peace" and we are talking about the part of our worship service where we set aside time to pass the peace of Christ with one another. As I was getting ready to write this sermon, a memory kept coming to mind. Every Sunday after church we would have dinner at my grandmother's house. Looking out around the congregation today and seeing many of you sitting in the same place you always sit, I think I can safely say that we tend to be creatures of habit. Correct? Well, each week we all sat in our same seats around my grandmother's large dining room table. My grandmother would sit at the head of the table closest to the kitchen, I would sit just to her right, my mother next to me and so forth. On my side of the table at the far end would sit my great-grandmother. She passed away at the age of 97 when I was 12 years old. She actually helped raise me as I would spend most of my time at their house while my parents were working before I was in school. But by that age my great-grandmother's taste buds were going (and so was her sight) and one of the things that was a common phrase heard at those Sunday dinners was "pass the salt". She constantly asked us to pass the salt, and would tap the table in front of her. It got to the point where we finally got an extra salt shaker and just set it in front of her so we didn't have to bother passing it any more.

And while many of our dinners were rather routine, often having the same meal of roast beef and mashed potatoes while sitting in our same seats, we sometimes mixed it up. We would play little tricks by unscrewing the tops of the salt shakers and putting napkins over the top with pepper in it and placing the lids back on so pepper would come out instead of salt and vice versa. Or at the end of the meal as my great-grandmother would often signal that she was done by sending her plate down the line to be scraped off and removed from the table, starting a chain reaction that everyone needed to follow suit. We would sometimes pass the plates all the way around the table until she finally

caught on to what was happening and we would have a good chuckle about it.

These family dinners often included extended family as relatives would visit or friends would join us. We had a habit of inviting anyone who needed a place to go after church to join us for these meals. We always had more than enough food. And everyone always seemed to fit around the table. But we also never held to the convention that there are certain things you don't talk about. My family - especially my extended family - always enjoyed talking about religion and politics. They liked to see just how much pot-stirring they could do - and I'm not talking about making sure the gravy didn't clump. These conversations could get heated as some of my family were very opinionated and "were always right" - or so they thought. Some weeks I was especially glad when dessert came so we could finally be excused and go watch football or me and my cousins could go play across the street in the park. While we enjoyed our meals at grandma's house, they were not always without issue. So we might have passed the salt, but we didn't always pass the peace.

I said a few weeks ago that I feel that the portion of our service regarding the passing of the peace is probably one of the most misunderstood portions of the service. In some churches it is seen as simply a time of greeting and a time of welcoming. It is seen as a good time to catch up with one another and see who is going where for dinner. But in reality it is to be a time of reconciliation.

Each week we put in the bulletin the instructions, "Let us offer signs of peace, reconciliation, and love with one another." Because that is what it is all about. And I feel our scripture for today from Matthew 5 encapsulates this idea very well. Jesus began this teaching by having people think about things from a different point of view. Yes, we can all agree that murder is bad. But what was Jesus trying to do here?

Jesus was showing that our relationships with one another are important. And while someone might not be getting physically injured, our actions, words, and thoughts may cause emotional pain and suffering and should be avoided. I could imagine people would use the argument that it didn't matter what comments people made - no one was getting hurt so they could do what they wanted. It's like the old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." For those of you who were ever bullied as kids, you know that saying is a lie.

We live in an age where people believe they can comment on anything online and that it is simply screaming into the void. That there is an anonymity to it and that no one gets hurt. And yet relationships are destroyed over a social media post and subsequent comment.

In our scripture today Jesus tells us, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire" (v. 22). That is some pretty serious stuff. I default to the commentaries here because we miss some things in the translation. Jesus is talking here about unjust anger, anger that we hold on to and refuse to let go, bitterness, and resentment. He's also talking about how we talk to and treat one another. Do we go around insulting each other or insult each other's intelligence?

The way we treat one another with our words is just as important as if we did physical harm to someone. And to further put this in context, Jesus tells us in worship we need to check ourselves and our relationships. Yes, we are here to worship God, and it is all about God. But if we come into worship - more specifically - if we come to give an offering to God - and we have not first reconciled ourselves with one another first, we should stop our worship and do that. That is how much of an importance God places on our relationships with one another. God would want us to settle our grievances first before continuing on in worship. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (23-24).

That is what the time of passing of the peace of Christ is for, and that is why we put right before the time of offering. Not only does it give our ushers time to get into position, but it gives us time to go to those in our midst to heal our relationships before we bring our offerings to God.

And it's not just about church. We are to settle our disputes as quickly as possible in all matters of life. "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison" (v. 25). As Paul reminds us in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

We are to try to be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation is mending a broken relationship. It is different from forgiveness. There can

be forgiveness without reconciliation. But it is not possible to truly reconcile with someone if you do not forgive them. Forgiveness is an act of faith. It takes the burden you are carrying of the hurt and pain that comes with whatever occurred and lays it down. You give it to Jesus. Forgiveness is between you and God. And yes, you can also offer that forgiveness to those who have wronged you, but just like the saying goes, "it takes two to tango," reconciliation takes both parties to come to the table to seek to mend the relationship. It cannot be one-sided because that does not heal anything.

Reconciliation seeks to regain and rebuild the trust that was lost in a relationship. It seeks to make amends. It seeks to restore the relationship to the status it was prior to whatever it was that caused the rift. And it starts with seeking forgiveness. It starts with acknowledging your fault in the situation and going to try to make things right.

But sadly, reconciliation is not always possible. I know there are broken relationships in my life. And I have sought to fix them. I have tried to make things right - to seek forgiveness when I have been in the wrong, and even when I was not. I have tried to have conversations that have not been received. And sadly, in some cases the individual has passed away so it is impossible to even attempt to heal those relationships.

We are to forgive each other when someone wrongs us. We are also to take it a step further and heal the relationship. But that takes both parties to be involved to fully provide that healing. And sometimes it is impossible.

Having the passing of the peace built into our time of worship gives us the opportunity to attempt to do so. Having it after the time of confession allows us to make our peace with God first and then to make our peace with one another. In the book, *Worshipping with United Methodists*, Hoyt Hickman says, "Having made or renewed peace with God, the people may offer one another signs of reconciliation and love. In asking for God's forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive one another. If God has forgiven us, we must then be willing to forgive others. Exchanging the peace after confession and pardon is a sign of reconciliation, peace, and love with one another" (p. 122).

And there is no set way for the peace to be shared, but the idea is to seek out those with whom we need to be reconciled and start that conversation. Because it's not an instantaneous process. "Oh look! We

are reconciled and we trust each other completely again!" It doesn't work that way. It takes time and effort. But you can go up to someone and say, "I'm sorry for the way I acted. Can you please forgive me? I would like to talk more about this. Let's meet for coffee."

And maybe during the time of passing the peace you don't need to be reconciled with anyone. That's great! That is when you offer signs of peace or love. And we are not talking about our understanding of peace, but shalom. In John 14:27, Jesus tells us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." This is what we are to offer to people - Jesus' peace, Jesus' shalom.

Shalom is a blessing and an understanding of completeness, wholeness, and soundness. It is the idea that nothing is missing and nothing is broken. It is well-being. It is restoration. So when we offer the peace of Christ, we offer a blessing of wholeness and well-being to each other, and we do so in love. Because Christ came to this world out of love for us and gave of himself out of love for us. He died on the cross out of love for us - forgiving our sins and reconciling us with God. All that because he loves us. That is a wonderful gift that Jesus gave to us. A gift that we specifically remember when we participate in communion.

And we need to make sure that we receive that gift in a worthy manner. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves." Confession and passing the peace allows us to check ourselves and try to heal our relationships with God and each other before continuing on with worship.

It is too easy to damage the relationships in our lives. We are constantly being bombarded by pressures and influences on every side. We have easy access to platforms where we can make our thoughts and our opinions known. But is it beneficial to spew out our thoughts so that they can hurt others? Is it beneficial to have those thoughts in the first place?

We are to guard our relationships closely. We are to work at maintaining them and improving them. And we are called to love one another as Christ loved us. I was reading John Wesley's sermon, The

Character of a Methodist. It begins by talking about the distinguishing marks of a Methodist and what they are not. And it is not our specific beliefs, because our beliefs can vary widely. It is not the words or phrases we use that specifically make us Methodist. It is not our specific actions or customs. It is not a specific emphasis of our religion. He argues it is our love of God and following Christ and how that plays out in our lives that is a key characteristic of a Methodist. It plays out in our happiness and contentment in Christ, our hope and endurance through suffering, and our continual prayers.

John Wesley states (which I paraphrase in modern English), "He constantly expresses his love for God - praying without ceasing, always rejoicing, giving thanks in every situation - and this command is written on his heart: whoever loves God must also love his brother. So he loves his neighbor as himself; he loves every person as he loves his own soul. His heart overflows with love for all humanity, for every child of the God who is Father over all spirits and all flesh. It doesn't matter to him whether he personally knows someone, or even whether that person has a character he disapproves of, or repays his goodwill with hostility - he loves them anyway. He loves his enemies, even those who oppose God, the wicked and the ungrateful. And if he isn't able to actually do good for those who hate him, he never stops praying for them, even while they keep rejecting his love and continue to mistreat and persecute him."

That is what John Wesley describes as a defining characteristic of a Methodist - someone who loves all people and does good to all people. And when we can't do good to or for them directly we pray for them. So if that is how we are to be as Methodists, we should be able to (at the very least) seek to be reconciled with one another. We should be able to truly offer signs of God's shalom and love to each other.

So as we approach that part of our service, I encourage you to check in with yourself. Is there someone who you need to seek to be reconciled with? And if they are here, take that time to start that process. And if they are not here, take the time when you go home to call them and start the conversation. And if there is not a broken relationship in your life that you know of, be open to offer forgiveness if someone seeks it from you. But as we take the time to pass the peace of Christ with one another, let us truly offer a blessing of wholeness, completeness, and wellbeing - which can be found in Christ. And may the peace of Christ be with us all.