

## “Preaching Peace”

A sermon by Rev Sue Strachan based on Acts 10:34-43

Wolcott Congregational Church

January 15, 2017

Peter, disciple of Jesus, now turned apostle which simply means one who is sent, has had a revelation. Through a vision and a dream, through an invitation to go and speak about Jesus Christ to a non-Jewish household, Peter finally gets what should be for us a no brainer that God shows no partiality! God's gift to the world was just that, given to the whole world, everybody can come to know God through Jesus Christ. The result? Peter finds himself standing in a strange neighborhood with a strange crowd with whom he would never have had any dealings. His speech which we just heard read may well be one of the most concise and powerful telling of the full gospel written in all of scripture.

It's all right there before him: Jesus' life, teachings, death by hanging on a cross, his resurrection, eating and talking with him afterward. Jesus is Lord of ALL. We've heard and told the old, old story of Jesus and his love. What surprised me though and what has caused me the most thought is what Peter says Jesus preached. It wasn't Love, Healing, Forgiveness, Salvation, Prayer. Peter tells us that God was preaching peace through Jesus Christ.

We have a few of Jesus' sermons, like the Sermon on the Mount and some other teachings. We have many of the teaching stories, the parables of Jesus from which he helped his listeners draw conclusions about living a Godly life. But, none of these are particularly concerned with “peace.” The word is seldom used. Yet, if I were to really reflect upon what is most necessary to my well being, to my ability to cope with all that comes my way, it is a sense of “peace” that I need most. In Hebrew the word is shalom and it has a fullness of meaning including wholeness, well-being, and perfect health.

When I first read the phrase “preaching peace” it brought to mind my teen aged and college years, the late 1960's with the peace movement and the anti-Viet Nam war protests. There were a lot of voices preaching peace in many ways, violent and non. Often the message was, like in our world, more of an ‘anti’ something rather than a ‘for’ something. I got thinking, “Did Jesus have an ‘anti’ message?” His teachings could be expressed as: anti partiality and prejudice; anti hatred, anger and violence; anti exclusion from society and particular religious practices; anti selfishness and greed; anti racial and religious profiling; anti maintaining the status quo of injustice; anti systemic abuses of the poor, the homeless, the mentally diseased, the list goes on and on. For me it puts the gospel in a very new light, a new perspective of what Jesus taught and what Jesus expects of me. This isn't the “lovey dovey” gospel of “isn't God nice and Jesus wants me to be nice too.” I think it demands more of me. But, how to convey the message by being “for” something rather than against something, to stand for something rather than fight against all the time.

Anyone who has ever gone to war or sent a loved one off to war knows peace doesn't just happen. We all know peace has to be made, worked at - not just in times of war, but every day,

wherever we may be: at work, among our friends, within our homes, and within our hearts. Peace may just be the most elusive and most prayed for quality in our lives. As Jesus said, his peace is given to us, not as the world gives, for it is his peace, the peace that goes beyond our understanding, sometimes way beyond. When we are willing to consider a little bit of peacemaking in our lives, we find the gospel message of Jesus to be counter intuitive. It makes no sense to us to turn the other cheek; it makes no sense to give away all that we have; it makes no sense to go first to the one who is holding something against us (if they are having a problem with us, that's their problem, right?). Not according to Jesus because as long as there is a problem there is no true peace, and so the problem remains ours until we act on it.

What keeps you awake at night, sleepless, tossing and turning? What keeps your stomach in a knot? What makes your head ache and more importantly your heart? These are the cries and prayers God heard and he answered them by sending his Son to preach peace. Peace was and is the declaration of the angels who announced the coming of the "Prince of Peace." So, what did Jesus preach?

If your stuff makes you worry, give it away. If your lack of stuff makes you worry, give what little you have away. Our lives cannot be about "getting or having stuff." The things of this world just will not and cannot satisfy, no matter what our TV's, computers, apps and cell phones tell us.

Jesus said, "You have heard do not kill, but I tell you do not even be angry . . . And if you find yourself at the altar and your brother has something against you, leave your gifts there and go and make it right." Our broken relationships with one another also break our relationship with God. We cannot bribe God at the altar with a gift and then pretend God doesn't know how broken we are and how full of anger, greed, selfishness, we are. God knows and calls us to the responsibility to go out and make peace. It is our responsibility to initiate the process because we are the ones who know the Prince of Peace, we are the ones who know a living and forgiving Savior. We, as Peter called us, are the witnesses.

How about this combo? – Turn the other cheek, go the second mile, do not judge, take the log out of your own eye, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." These things would bring peace, but they would also seem to take the starch out of us, right? A little indignation, a little sarcasm, a little cynicism, a little criticism of others gives us energy and some power and control. We deserve a little self-righteousness, right? I mean I am basically not a bad person. Why would anyone even think that?

According to Peter, Jesus went around preaching peace. In his preaching and in his living Jesus showed us how his peace could change the world. In his dying and in his rising, he showed us that his peace begins with the forgiving grace of our loving God which was poured out on the cross and raised from the grave for all of us, not just a holy chosen few, but just as Peter discovered, for all.

If you are interested in having peace in your daily life, making peace and living peace, the place to start is where Peter started when he realized for the first time that "Jesus is Lord of all."

Peter had to give up his idea of a privileged place for himself and his people. He had to let go of his prejudices and his hatred of the occupying forces and the foreigners around him. And he had to let all of "them" into his life and into his love. If strong-willed, impulsive Peter can do it, can risk losing himself in order to find himself, then maybe we can too. Jesus is Lord of ALL. Maybe that is just as hard for us to imagine as it was for Peter, but that is the Truth that will set us free to love, to heal, to be instruments of and to receive within ourselves the peace of Christ that passes all understanding.

I know that we understand that last phrase to mean that the peace of Christ is beyond our ability to comprehend. But, how about if we change that to also mean that the peace of Christ is what "passes" understanding on as a gift from me to you, and eventually to all. Let us pass the peace to all we meet, pass the understanding of who Jesus Christ is in our world through everything we say and everything we do. Peace. Amen.