

Sermon: The Path to Peace
Text: Philippians 4:4-9
Date: November 20, 2016
Context: WWPC
Thanksgiving Service
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Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Philippians 4:6

What is the path to inner peace?

Oddly, this is not a question Christian folk in general, or Presbyterians more specifically, ask very often. We take Jesus at his word about *peacemakers*, that people who work to address and reduce conflict in the world at large are especially blessed.

But to many of us here today, not all of us, surely, but many of us – it seems like the question of inner peace, and how to achieve it, falls more squarely within the purview of other faith traditions and more, shall we say, exotic spiritual practices—like Buddhism or yoga, or tai chi.

This could perhaps also explain why so many people are turning to those traditions and practices, and why it seems like there are as many yoga studios and tai chi classes on offer in Asheville these days as there are churches and Sunday school classes.

Indeed, we have a tia chi class right here. Because who doesn't need a little inner peace, especially these days?

I know I do.

I am well aware that the overwhelming majority of people who attend church on Sunday morning come for worship, not for politics. And again I'm betting that this includes most of us here today.

I do understand this. But it's also true that as a preacher and a faith leader, it's my job to speak to the issues of the day. And I'm not just making this up because it suits me.

This is a matter of long-standing tradition, dating back to the prophets of the Old Testament. One affirmed more recently by Karl Barth, the most prominent theologian of the 20th century.

I've noted here before that Barth is said to have once declared that Christian people must approach their devotional life, and their public service, with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

It turns out that no one can find any recorded instance where Barth actually said those exact words.

Here's what he did say, in a 1966 interview: "the Pastor and the Faithful should not deceive themselves into thinking that they are a religious society, which [only] has to do with certain themes [presumably narrowly religious themes]; they live in the world. We still need - according to my old formulation - the Bible and the Newspaper".¹

So if I may engage in a moment of partisan advocacy, this may be what makes church different from a yoga studio. Mind you, I think all of us would probably benefit from doing yoga regularly.

But what we do here is not about our bodies necessarily, it's about the world around us. It's not about making inner peace but about making peace in the world at large, in times and in places riven by conflict.

One could argue that this work is one of the main pillars of the Christian faith, that in the mind of its visionary founder, peacemaking is one of the reasons there is a Christian faith at all:

So there would always be a core group of faithful people who would meet hate with love, who would resist the harmful ways human beings so often treat one another, and bring healing and reconciliation where there is pain and division.

¹ Quoted here: <http://nacreouskingdom.blogspot.com/2010/10/bible-in-one-hand-and-newspaper-in.html>

A body who would use their collective voice to proclaim a word of hope and liberation to those in captivity—political captivity, economic captivity, theological captivity, the captivity of fear and xenophobia.

For most of us here today, perhaps even for all of us here today, what we read in the newspaper right now is troubling, especially over against what we read in scripture and what we believe and value as followers of Jesus.

I noted last week that in the immediate aftermath of the election, a flood of early stories appeared about racially motivated hate crimes.

Such incidents are still going on across the country but those accounts have given way this week—week two—to a flood of other, equally troubling stories.

We're now seeing reports about the growing push for the mass deportation of immigrants, about the possibility of the forced registration of all Muslim Americans, with references to Japanese internment camps as precedent.

And just this morning I saw a story in *The New York Times* about how white nationalists are now heralding “an awakening” in our country.

These proposed actions and policies, these escalating trends, stand at direct odds with our vision for this country, a place where immigrants are welcome, in part because virtually every one of us is a descendant of immigrants at some point in our family history.

And where freedom of religion is celebrated as a bedrock American value, and where the coercive treatment of any resident without due process is simply wrong, politically and morally.

Taken together, these proposals ring very loud alarm bells for many of us, in large part because they evoke another era in history, the darkest era of the 20th century in fact.

I got a very personal reminder of this early this week. A friend of mine who runs a non-profit in Asheville stopped by my office to update me on what their plans are moving forward.

She told me the story of the founder of the group, who happened to grow up in the 1930s in Germany and who happened to be Jewish.

Where are all the good Germans? her parents asked, as they saw the walls closing in around immigrants and gypsies and homosexuals and, yes, Jews.

They might as well have asked *Where are all the good Christians?* because the German church failed to speak out as loudly and decisively and prophetically as it should have done when its members saw these same walls closing in on their neighbors and fellow citizens.

As the great Lutheran theologian and pastor, Martin Niemöller, famously put it, and you've heard this quote before:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We're not going to make this mistake again. Along with hundreds perhaps even thousands of other churches and communities of faith, we are going to speak out.

We're going to meet hate with love, and we're going to resist the demonization of our fellow citizens because that, my friends, is in large measure what it means to practice the Christian faith.

Because what we see happening right now is not just at odds with our deepest values as Americans, it's at odds with the deepest values of our faith tradition. So as citizens and as Christians we simply cannot let hate and xenophobia become normalized.

We must speak out against them and resist them and bear witness over against them to a different truth: the truth that all God's children, regardless of race or class or religious affiliation, are to be loved and respected and welcomed.

Am I stunned by what I am reading in the newspaper? Stunned to be having the kinds of conversations I had with my friend earlier this week? Stunned to be covering this kind of ground here today, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving?

Yes, I am. This shift we are all witnessing has happened so swiftly, so alarmingly, that I myself am struggling with the question of how to achieve inner peace.

Which is to say that if you're feeling more anxious than peaceful this morning, or more fearful than hopeful, or more angry than tranquil, you are perhaps not alone. Probably some of your neighbors in the pews today are feeling the same way.

But it's also to say that we cannot stay in a place of anxiety or anger or fear. Because we can only make peace in the world outside ourselves if the world inside ourselves is at peace.

And the good news is that the Christian faith does, in fact, address the question of inner peace.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, Jesus says to his disciples in John 14. *Believe in God, believe also in me.*

And again, a little later in this same chapter: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

What is not immediately obvious is the timing of this exhortation, and it's worth noting because it is extraordinary.

Jesus offers this word right toward the end of his life, right before he is about to enter Jerusalem.

God's own incarnate emissary is heading into the capital for a final confrontation with the forces of Empire, with the powers that be, the powers that have colonized and oppressed the Jewish people for decades, and that currently dominate the known world, a final confrontation that will not end will for him.

And what does he say?

Peace be with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

That sounds nice, wonderful in fact. But exactly how does one achieve this peace, how does one experience it?

Is there an app for that? Some magic formula? Do we chant Om for 30 minutes every morning before we head out to meet the day?

Well, that might actually be a good idea. And some of you may already be doing just that.

But there's also a hint of an answer in the text I read earlier. A practice that can, over time, create a pathway to peace.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In short, pray, then give thanks. Give voice to your concerns to God, then name and give thanks for your blessings.

Because that's not just what peace looks like. That's what faith looks like, a faith whose practitioners can go out into the world and make peace because that peace resides unshakably in the world deep inside themselves.

And because that faith, in turn, it is rooted in the belief that God is with us and for us, that God incarnate came to show us the way of peace, and that, by the Holy Spirit, this same God now resides in us, the Body of Christ in the world.

Amen.