

Peacemaking for Families

Matthew 5:9 and James 4:1-10

Pastor Tom Anderson

On behalf of our congregation, I would like to thank all of our veterans for your service to our country and for your contributions to our freedom, justice and peace. We are a nation at war. We do not think alike about the origins of this conflict, but the truth is that our democracy—along with many other nations—made a commitment, and we are now morally responsible for the near future of Iraq and Afghanistan. Close to 166,000 of our sons and daughters are giving hard service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their mission is to establish justice and win the peace for the good citizens of those troubled lands as well as for ourselves. Despite our political differences, let us be united in our prayers for their success, for the protection of the innocent and for everyone's safe return home.

Peace making is for everyone. With this beatitude, we move from “being” to “doing”. Peacemaking is the essential work of a Christian, and it is foundational to happiness. “God has called us to live in peace.” (1 Corinthians 7:15) The Christian must “turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.” (1 Peter 3:11)

To strive for peace is to imitate God. Hence peacemakers are to be called “sons of God.” Our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to make peace through his blood, shed upon the cross. (Colossians 1:20). “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” (Romans 5:1-2) Christ has also made peace between us by abolishing the barriers and distinctions of race, gender, class and creed—“there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female.” (Galatians 3:28) “Christ himself is our peace, who has made us one and has destroyed the barriers, the dividing walls of hostility.” (Ephesians 2:14)

To be peacemakers, we must understand the roots of conflict are in our selfish and sinful human desires.

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want...you do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3)

Some desires are bad from the get-go: like coveting your neighbors' property or spouse. Some desires are good, like wanting your children to be honest and fair or wanting your home to be a quiet and relaxing place. Things begin to go wrong for us when we turn our desires into demands; things that we absolutely must have in order to be happy. "I must have honest children....I must have a quiet house." Our demands then lead us into disappointment: we blame and accuse our family members for not meeting our demands. Then we reach the final stage: judgment and punishment. We judge and punish those around us with words or actions, and we seek in every way to dominate and coerce them to meet our demands and make us happy.

This is the evolution of a false god. A false god is any desire that you have that you place at the center of your life. Author and pastor John Piper said that "sin is what you do when you are not satisfied with God." The root of all conflict is the false gods we have made out of our desires.

Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the peace fakers." People who fake peace are those who try to escape or deny conflict. They seek a "me" oriented solution. They deny the problem and then bury themselves in work or withdraw to pursue hobbies or TV. The peace faker just wants to feel good; he really doesn't care about achieving real peace.

Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the peace breakers." These are people who want to attack and blame others. They do not want peace; they just want to win; to dominate. They seek a "you" oriented solution. They say that "if you would just change, then I would be happy." You can tell a peace breaker because they lace their speech with one and only one pronoun: "You...you...you."

By contrast the real peace maker is not into "me" solutions or "you" solutions, but "we" solutions. How can we find positive solutions based on our shared interests?

Peacemakers have a different view of conflict. They see it, not as something to be afraid of, but as an ally which will help us to grow our souls. They see it, not as a chance to dominate and win, but to honor Jesus Christ.

Conflict is an opportunity to glorify God. The Bible says, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31) The peace maker is driven by this question, "How can I show the love of Christ and the grace of God in this situation?"

Peacemakers begin by getting the plank out of their own eyes. Jesus said, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3) The peace maker searches his or her own heart for the false gods we have made out of our desires and clears them away, confessing and apologizing for turning their desires into demands and judgments.

Peacemakers seek to gently restore. They follow the rule of Christ in all conflict, “If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you...” (Matthew 18:15) Instead of talking about other people they talk to them.

Finally peacemakers go to be reconciled with those whom they have hurt. Jesus said, “...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you...first go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24) Is there someone you need to call or visit this afternoon? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to ask forgiveness from?

Sometimes peace is not possible because someone else is dangerously abusive, profoundly addicted or plainly irrational. In these cases the best a peacemaker can do is to protect the innocent and find a safe place to pray and to hope.

Heidi Neumark is the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in the South Bronx. She tells a story about picking up a little girl—Shanna—for Sunday school. One Sunday the little girl appeared at the door crying with blood on her dress. “It’s my uncle Joe,” she cried. Pastor Heidi knew the man was a drug addict and causing serious problems in the family. The little girl had every reason to despise her uncle. For years she had wanted a bicycle. Someone in the church made her dream come true and she went everywhere with her brand new blue bicycle. Then Uncle Joe sold it for drugs.

This Sunday morning, Uncle Joe had come home from an evening’s carousing wearing a t-shirt that said, “Just say no to drugs.” “Why don’t you read your t-shirt?” Shanna challenged him...at which point he struck her across the face, bloodying her nose. Everyone was asleep, so Pastor Heidi just took her to church, where her Sunday school teacher washed out her dress as best she could and cleaned her up.

That morning at prayer time in the worship service, little 9-year-old Shanna blurted out her prayer bright and clear as a trumpet blast, "I pray for my Uncle Joe. He needs your help, Lord. Please, Jesus, help my uncle."

In her astonishment, Pastor Heidi concluded the story with this affirmation: What a privilege to drink from the same chalice as Shanna! At the end of the day even when there is no peace, our greatest testimony is to pray for our enemies and to hope. Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called the children of God.