

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Come to the Table

Text: Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Title: The Table of Peace

In the movie, Miss Congeniality, there is a scene where each of the contestants is asked “What is the one most important thing that our society needs.” Most of the contestants answer, “World Peace”. The undercover agent played by Sandra Bullock responds, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators.” The crowd is silent. She pastes a plastic smile on her face and says, “And world peace!” The crowd breaks into loud cheers. It’s the answer we expect. It’s an image that is conjured up when we think about beauty pageants – there is a stereotype that says that the most common answer in the pageants involves a desire for “world peace.”

Peace is something that we all want in our world and in our lives, but it is something that is often missing. We may even find it hard to describe what we mean by peace. A common definition of peace is “freedom from or a cessation of war or violence.” But peace is far more than the emptiness of war. Just ask the residents of North or South Korea. After their war in the 1950’s, the two countries never signed a peace treaty and are technically still at war, 60 years later. Most of the time there may not be active acts of war going on between them, but there is definitely not anything that most of us would call a real peace.

It was a very strange feeling about three years ago, when I briefly visited the DMZ or Demilitarized Zone from the South Korean side. It looks beautiful with its green grass and where I was there was a very nice display designed to appeal to tourists but the sentry towers are a constant

reminder that this is probably the most dangerous border in the world. Just across the river lies North Korea and that side of the border is very heavily fortified. It was a surreal experience to be there however briefly.

True peace is much more than the absence of war or violence.

We have been talking about the tables to which Jesus invites us – not always tables with food, and not always tables, but always places of connection with other people. Last week, we talked about the table of love – the place where we are loved by God; where everyone is invited and welcomed, and everyone is loved.

With that as the most fundamental thing to know about God's table – it puts all of our behavior and attitudes in a different perspective. It makes the table of peace much more than a table where people come to negotiate or sometimes bully or threaten each other into an agreement of some sort.

We know that there have been far more attempts at finding a peaceful solution to the ongoing situation between Israel and Palestine. In 2002, I had the opportunity to visit Israel and one of my most vivid memories was entering Jerusalem where a large wall and check points slowed entry. As we arrived at the check point, and the tour guide was assuring the soldiers that we all had valid United States passports, the song coming over the speakers in the bus was "The Holy City" and especially the words, "It's gates were opened wide, and all who would might enter, and no one was denied." I have many memories of that song, since my father sang it often, but those words at that particular moment, brought me to tears; because the gates were most definitely not opened wide, and there were many who were regularly denied entry both into the city and in other places throughout the area. There was no obvious war at

the time, but there were many soldiers with guns, and there was clearly was no peace.

This particular situation bothered me probably even more than the situation between North and South Korea – because the three major groups in Israel and Palestine all worship the same God – although we see God differently. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship the God of Abraham. We are cousins, and it is most painful that, even believing and worshipping the same God, we are so very different in many ways and there is such a lack of peace in so many places.

Peace is more than the absence of war. Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “More than just an end to war, we want an end to the beginning of all wars.”

It is the end to the beginning of all wars – especially those little wars that we think of more as conflicts that is addressed in our scriptures today.

In our Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who wrongs him. Tradition was that forgiveness should be extended three times. Peter thinks he’s being very generous, and understanding Jesus when he offers the idea of forgiving as many as seven times. Jesus, as he frequently does, changes the landscape completely with his response. Rather than giving Peter another law, a nice number to be able to count – a more liberal accounting system to use while we grit our teeth and just wait for the time when we can seek revenge - Jesus turns the situation around. It’s not about us forgiving, it is about how much we have been forgiven and what our response is to that forgiveness.

Jesus tells a parable that can easily get lost for us because we live in a different culture and time. A king is owed a humongous debt, 10,000 talents, by one of his servants. 1 talent was the equivalent of 15 years wages for a manual laborer. 10,000 was the largest number known at the

time. The servant owed his master 10,000 talents, an impossibly large number to imagine. The tax revenue for all of the territories under the control of Herod the Great was about 900 talents a year and he was incredibly wealthy. This is Jesus' way of saying that the debt owed by the servant to the master was the largest possible sum – an inconceivable amount. A manual laborer would have to work 150,000 years to earn that much money. So, you can see, this is not really a story about any possible debt. It is about something unimaginable.

The servant asked for mercy, asked to be given more time as if it were even possible to pay back such a debt. The king, instead, forgave the debt – he cancelled it. He sent the servant out free – with no obligations.

I would imagine that he would have gone out singing and dancing – celebrating the greatest miracle of all. I would expect him to immediately run home to tell his wife the great news – but that is not what happened. Instead, he met another servant who owed him a very small amount – something that was quite payable. When the second servant could not repay the debt, instead of showing any mercy, the first servant, the one who had been forgiven an impossible to imagine debt, threw his fellow servant in prison.

This is the story told in response to Peter's question – "how often should I forgive?" It's not about numbers. It's about how much we have been forgiven and how we respond to that.

You have heard me say this before, and you will likely hear me say something similar every time the subject of forgiveness comes up. This is not to say that we should continue to put ourselves in a position where we have to keep forgiving. This is not to say that what someone does to us is

okay. Some things are never okay. There are things that we do not and must not ever condone.

However, forgiveness has nothing to do with condoning or minimizing behavior. It has everything to do with not holding on to the behavior in a way that continues to give the other person power over us, allowing the other person to keep us in a prison of pain and suffering.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. If you have any questions about that or want to talk more – please let’s talk, because I don’t want anyone to misunderstand what I am saying.

Perhaps one of the ways to look at what this is all about is to look at Paul’s letter to the Romans. In that letter, Paul who is well aware of what he has been forgiven, talks about how we deal with conflicts and disagreements within the church and how we avoid carrying a grudge or judging another person. He reminds us that our lives are not about ourselves, but about God and about our relationship with God. As he says, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Everything in our lives is to be viewed and understood through that lens. The most precious things in our lives – the people we love the most – are gifts and are all part of our relationship with God.

The table of peace is that place where as Paul describes, we recognize that there are some things that are not really our responsibility. We are not the ultimate judge about the rightness or the wrongness about how another person faithfully believes. I believe that God wants us to use all of the resources that have been given to us – and that includes our brains, our ability to reason.

In Methodism, we recognize that we base our beliefs and understandings on four things – we sometimes call it the Wesleyan quadrilateral. When we face those difficult decisions in life – those real puzzles, we look to scripture. As we look at scripture, we also look to tradition – what has the church understood about this throughout history. We look to reason – what does our brain tell us, what makes sense here? We look to experience – both ours and that of others. We seek answers in prayer. We put all of these together and we come to an understanding, a discernment about where God is leading us.

Sometimes that means that people of faith will not agree about certain things. John Wesley followed a time-honored dictum that can be helpful to us as well. “In Essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity.” In the United Methodist Church there is room for people who do not see eye-to-eye on some of the non-essentials. We may not even agree upon what those non-essentials are, but remembering that we are people loved by God, forgiven by God, and accepted by God, we respond with charity – with love, acceptance for our brothers and sisters.

A few minutes ago, we sang, “Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved in living situations to do the truth in love; to practice your acceptance, until we know by heart the table of forgiveness and laughter’s healing art.”<sup>i</sup>

The Dalai Lama XIV said, “Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means; through dialogue, education, knowledge; and through humane ways.”

No matter who we are, or where we are from, we are invited to God’s table. We will not all agree, especially when we gather with those of

different faiths or no faith. However, even at those times, we remember that we are first and foremost Christians, people who have been forgiven far more than we can even begin to comprehend. We have been loved and accepted and our response to that is to reach out to all of God's children with that same love. Then, and only then, can we live with true peace – with rest and tranquility.

Inner peace or peace of mind is the state of being mentally and spiritually at peace and with enough knowledge and understanding to keep ourselves strong in the face of discord or stress.

John F. Kennedy said, "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures."

We begin where we are. We begin with those with whom we are in contact. We expand through our mission giving to reach those whom we will never know, but those with whom we must also be at peace.

The International Alert describes peace as when "people are able to resolve their conflicts without violence and can work together to improve the quality of their lives. Peace is when everyone lives in safety, without fear or threat of violence and no form of violence is tolerated in law or in practice."<sup>ii</sup>

Peace begins with each one of us. Margaret Mead said that we should "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

It is up to each of us, to come to the table of peace, even when it is difficult. It is up to each one of us to extend that peace and hope to all. To paraphrase John F. Kennedy – we cannot rely upon paper agreements for

peace. Peace comes when we “strive to build peace, a desire for peace, a willingness to work for peace in the hearts and minds of all people.”

“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Every knee shall bow and every tongue give praise to God who has set us free to love, to forgive, and to live in peace at God’s table.

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<sup>i</sup> Help Us Accept Each Other. Fred Kaan, UMH#560, vs. 3

<sup>ii</sup> [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)