

Wesley United Methodist Church
September 13, 2020
Living With Christ - Peace
Scripture: Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-22

In the Sandra Bullock movie, Miss Congeniality, she plays the part of an undercover agent at a beauty pageant. At one point, the contestants are asked, "What is the one most important thing that our society needs?" She responds, "That would be harsher punishment for parole violators." The silence of the crowd is almost deafening. Then she pastes a smile on her face and gives the answer that the crowd expects to hear, "And World Peace" and the crowd breaks into loud cheers. That's the answer they want to hear. It's the answer we all want to hear.

We want world peace. We want peace on our streets. We want peace in our homes and places of employment. At the beginning of our worship time, we heard Martha sing, "Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love." These words are a paraphrase of a prayer ascribed to Saint Francis of Assisi – a prayer for peace.

They remind us that we are important agents of peace in our world. Franklin D. Roosevelt once 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, and especially to those we think of as ordinary conflicts that is addressed in our scripture today. Conflicts and disagreements are sure to arise between people and groups of people, but today, in his letter to the Romans, Paul focuses on how we deal with those conflicts or disagreements that if left to fester can grow into acts of exclusion, and even acts of violence.

Paul was addressing a couple of very specific disagreements among followers of Jesus – ones that may not make a lot of sense to us today – but were very important to the believers in Rome. They led to very serious disagreement among leaders of the early church. The disagreements were serious enough that some thought that it was not possible to worship or fellowship with those who thought differently,

We can think of controversies today that we, and others, feel so passionately about that we cannot avoid portraying our opponents as being confused about their

faith, as not understanding scripture or worse yet ignoring it, or even as being opposed to what God wants. The United Methodist Church is anything but united on the question of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. After last year's special session of General Conference and in anticipation of the 2020 session that was postponed because of Covid 19, it seemed very much like we were not "united" but in many ways, "untied" looking at schism, separation, and formation of new denominations.

This is not only a religious issue, but it is most definitely an issue for society, as is the hot button of abortion. Behind these and other issues are also the questions of the authority of Scripture and how we employ scripture to shape our beliefs about evolution, Communion, climate control, immigration, racial justice, and so many other really important areas of disagreement. We become really passionate about these subjects, and we should, but the challenge is that our passion not take us down a road that leads us to actions contrary to who we claim to be as Christians.

In a world that is filled with violence, it is vitally important that we are equipped on how to deal with conflict, how to de-escalate a situation rather than escalating it. It is important that we be peacemakers; that we be that channel through which peace can flow.

Years ago, I studied family systems theory and one of the concepts I learned about was triangulation. It seems to be an almost natural tendency for us to try to get someone else on our side in a conflict or disagreement. When a third party enters into a disagreement between two people, things get really complicated. Police officers are familiar with the way this can happen all too easily when responding to a call about domestic violence. They can tell you stories of how they tried to protect one person from being hurt by another, only to have that person turn on them, attack them and try to protect the person from whom they originally sought protection.

Often triangulation gets used as a substitute for direct communication. Because I don't think I can tell you what I really think I tell someone else what I want you to know and hopefully that person will tell you. Occasionally it works well, but more often than not, triangulation creates other problems. By the way, this is not to be confused with two parties mutually agreeing to enter into mediation or counseling.

However, contrary to these ideas from psychology, Paul offers us a very positive approach to triangulation. He reminds us that our relationship to every other person is to be seen through our relation to God. We are to see the other person, or the other group, as a child of God and when we do that consistently, it changes how we look at or treat another person.

This isn't easy to do, and if you doubt that, Paul gives us a good example of it. While he is telling us to welcome those with whom we disagree and not to judge others, he falls victim to it himself. I had never really noticed that until a commentator pointed it out. While "Paul is urging us to avoid passing judgment – at the same time, he seems unable to resist characterizing those with whom he disagrees as weak in faith."ⁱ He says that we should welcome them, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

He is most definitely not saying that we should stop advocating for our view. He does that all the time. And many times, our view and our passion come from our desire to do what we believe God is calling us to do. Many times our passion comes from our understanding of God. However, his focus here is on the attitude and the spirit of those who are arguing. He is concerned about how we treat the ones with whom we disagree. He reminds us that in all things, we belong to God – and those with whom we disagree also belong to God.

He knew what he was talking about. Before the time that Paul was writing to the Romans, before the time that he became the passionate missionary eager to tell everyone about Jesus, he was also the person who with equal passion tried to persecute followers of Jesus. He participated in the stoning of Stephen. He went around trying to arrest followers of Jesus. Then he had a profound experience on the road to Damascus and he understood what he had been doing. He became equally passionate about following Jesus and about teaching others about him.

Paul understood that God loved him even when he was acting against God. He understood that God had not rejected him, but instead had reached out to include him. Paul learned to be an agent of peace. He learned that he had been very wrong, and he recognized that despite all our best intentions, we may still not understand something. We may be wrong. With that in mind and understanding that everything we do should

reflect our relationship with God, he tried to prevent the different sides from becoming so polarized that they stopped seeing the other as a child of God.

We see this conflict today not only between political parties but also within Christianity. It's no secret today that fundamentalists and progressives within the faith are convinced that their position is right. When we mix this in with our political climate, we may find it just about impossible to speak to the other without violating Christ's instruction to love one another, to treat each other the way we want to be treated.

Paul says that there is a different way – the way of faith – a way that treats the other person as a someone that God loves just as much as God loves us. So, what might that look like in today's world?

Maybe we start to pay attention to ways that we can really talk with the people we disagree with. Welcoming them as Paul says, but not for the purpose of quarreling or convincing them they are wrong. I think that this involves effort and time, but perhaps one thing is to engage in truly active listening. Instead of preparing our argument, maybe we could try really listening to the other. Try to hear where he or she is coming from rather than criticizing and putting the person on the defensive. Listen the way we would like someone to listen to us.

Maybe we could ask questions or invite sharing. Help me understand how you came to believe Fill in the blank. It might help us understand the perspective of the other person. Maybe he or she is coming from a place of fear or anger. If we are willing to listen to the fear or the anger and understand where it is coming from, what caused it, what the person is really afraid of then we may be able to have a better conversation about that or at least acknowledge that the fear or anger is real – even if it is different for us. If we can truly listen, the person may begin to trust us a little bit and begin to understand that we really do care about him or her as a person as someone loved by God, not just someone to argue with, someone who we think has it all wrong.

Maybe we can remember to speak to the other person with respect. Instead of telling someone that their idea is stupid, we can say, "I don't agree with you and this is why." We can use "I" statements rather than "you" statements. It's much easier to hear "I'm under a lot of pressure right now, could we maybe discuss this later" than it is

to hear, “You always want to talk about that when I’m under pressure and don’t have time.”

When another person starts to become angry and loud, it can be very helpful to stay calm, to speak more softly. This often helps to de-escalate a situation rather than adding fuel to the fire. It can be helpful to repeat the key points the other person made to show that you have heard what was said. Often that makes it easier for the other person to listen to you.

Any and all of these are simple – or maybe not so simple – ways to begin to be a peace maker to introduce peace into a volatile situation. It helps if we can check out perceptions. We might discover that one of us has misunderstood the other. It’s not always clear if we are thinking about what the other said or if our silence implies anger or disagreement. By the way, that’s doubly important when we are wearing masks while interacting with another person. It’s not obvious if we are smiling behind our mask or if we are frowning.

By the way, I wish I were really good at doing all this, but I’m still learning. Sometimes I can do this well and other times I fail miserably. I think that’s called being human. Thankfully God still loves me, and God still loves you, and we can always try again.

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

I suspect that Paul would agree with that. When we are living, when we are dying, we are God’s. Every moment. Every day. Every step of the way.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, it can be so tempting to just get angry at someone with whom we disagree. It can be tempting to say things we might later regret. It can be easy to put another down, but you call us to a different way. You call us to see each person as one of your beloved children and to treat them the way we want to be treated. Guide us one step at a time as we slowly learn to be peacemakers in our world.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A. Theological commentary on Romans 14:1-12