

“Peace Full”

Psalms 85:7-13; Isaiah 9:6-7 & 26:2-4;
Luke 1:67-79 & 1:46-55

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
December 23, 2012

This Sunday's theme is peace, and I was thinking about that idea of peace, wondering, do we want peace? Is it something we want in our lives? I was thinking about that as a parent. After hearing the children fighting over something for a long period of time, not being able to decide whose toy it really is, after a while you come and say, “I really want some peace.” Or those moments when you are with a group of friends and there is bickering going on and you just get tired of it and want it to stop. You want peace. Or you hear politicians yammering and you might wish for peace. Or we might look around the world and see the conflicts and wish for peace. In general, we often do that, we wish for peace. What is peace?

The first thing that comes to my mind when I think about peace is walking up to a pristine mountain lake, being able to sit in the sun and bask in the quiet. That's an image of peace for me. Yet, I think it goes beyond that. It's more than just wanting peace and quiet, even in a beautiful setting. There's more to peace than just being in a nice place and having quiet. We often think of peace as the absence of conflict. I really think peace is more than that, but to get to that “more” we have to begin to think about what it means to go beyond my mountain lake and wondering what real peace is and what causes a lack of peace. These scriptures this week led me to think about that.

It reminded me of a time when I was just beginning my first real job. I finally got out of college and had taken a job in the Bay area and was working in a small office with just one other guy. He was the regional sales manager and I was the guy who was supposed to demonstrate the equipment. I was supposed to be responsible for the equipment and he was responsible for sales. He called me into his office one day and told me he had booked my instrument for this place. Looking back on it now, it wasn't a big deal, but at the time I thought, “I have the responsibility for that equipment. *You're* not supposed to be telling *me* what to be doing.” It was one of those times in my life when I saw red. I knew for the moment I had to just turn and walk away. But what caused that conflict? It was a question of who had the authority, who had the responsibility, who was right, who got to make the decision. Being fresh and new and feeling the responsibility, I really felt it being taken away. It could have created a huge conflict in the office. How much conflict is a result of who we think had the authority?

It can also happen to us as individuals. I was helping run a small laboratory in Berkeley and had responsibility for hiring and firing, creating work schedules and job descriptions, and managing the people in that laboratory, deciding how the work went and who got to work. What arose in me was a conflict because I had authority the company had given me about how this group was supposed to work. I had a responsibility to the company. Then I had this group of people I was responsible for, and sometimes it didn't feel like what was good for the company was always good for the people who worked there. So there was this conflict that arose within me. What authority was I going to listen to? Was I simply going to listen to the company I worked for and let that be the only authority in my life? Or was there another authority that was at work?

It makes me wonder, what are the authorities in our lives? We have all kinds of authority going on. Parents are authorities. Sometimes children end up being authorities. We have jobs, bosses, institutions, politicians, news sources. We have advertising. We have memes. Have you heard about memes? On the internet, when somebody sends you one of these pictures with a saying, that's a meme. It's one of those cute things that goes around the internet these days. For example, here is one that is a picture of a bag of oranges with a single lemon in it. It says, "Day 16: I have earned the oranges' trust. They still do not know that I am a lemon." Here's another one that has a number of pictures of the same guy, who is an internet scientist. These are pictures of what different people think he does. His parents think he just sits around sending text messages on his phone. He thinks he's like Spiderman coming to work. Then there's a picture of what he really does: he makes these little pictures.

Why do I say that these are an authority? Because of how we react to them. We might see them as humorous, but we might also connect with them in some way that allows them to reflect or confirm our own beliefs. "I have earned the oranges' trust. They still don't know I'm a lemon." It's kind of cute, but is there some sense in which we ever feel like a lemon among a bunch of oranges? I think there are reasons that these resonate with us at times. While they may not be an authority themselves, they reflect what the authority is in our lives. They give voice to it. So a belief about ourselves is an authority in our lives. It is one of the ways that we will do things.

Why have I been thinking about all this? It's all because of a couple of lines out of Isaiah where Jesus is being described. A baby will be born and upon his shoulders will be the authority. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is what got me thinking about authority—on his shoulders will be authority, and a little later it says that authority will grow. I began to wonder what are the authorities in our lives and how is that related to peace and conflict.

If we look at what Isaiah says, at the descriptions given here, he starts with Wonderful Counselor. No matter which way you think about it, whether you think about it legally or psychologically, the idea is that a wonderful counselor is the one who has the answers, has it right. Next, Mighty God. It's interesting to me—is there anything more powerful than God, and then you have to add *mighty* to that? Mighty God—what greater authority could there be. Everlasting Father—another description of authority. The one that trips me up a little bit is the Prince of Peace. I think it should be King of Peace. Why is it Prince instead of King? The prince is the one in waiting to rule. Of course, this is about a child who is coming, but again, it begins to speak to what Christ is. He is the one waiting to enter our lives to guide us, to be the authority that helps us know what is good and right.

Isaiah says that in his kingdom, under his authority, it's about righteousness, justice. We can see it also with Mary. As she sees God at work, what she begins to see is how what God does is to do some leveling. He brings the lowly up and the powerful down. The hungry are fed and the rich go away empty. As we allow Christ to be the authority, it changes things.

It's interesting how much in our personal lives all authorities are partial, and those partial authorities at some point have conflicts and we have to figure out how to work through

them. In fact, I sometimes wonder if we can have peace without having a single authority. I'm not sure about that.

The other piece to what I see about Jesus is that when he comes in his authority, he doesn't come to simply build up his own authority. Oftentimes, what it feels like is power tries to support its own power, but in some ways Jesus comes to give it away, to give the goodness that he has to God's people. He comes not to build himself up, but to build up the people he comes to be authority over. He comes to guide us.

So what does that mean for something like a conflict with a co-worker? I could have decided that in that office, it was going to be war. There would always be a feud. I could always be trying to assert my authority and he could always be trying to assert his and we could be at loggerheads. I looked beyond and realized that my authority was limited, even in the company, even in relationship to that particular instance, and recognized that there is something higher and more important that calls me not to be at conflict, but to work towards peace. Oftentimes, I think the hardest thing to do is to actually address the problem, and instead just to walk away in anger and to live out of that anger instead of going back and working it out. I think that's part of having a higher authority, knowing Christ is the one who shows us the way, guides us to what is right, leads us to what is good. Or, as Zechariah finishes his soliloquy, he guides our feet to the way of peace.

The Psalm says—and I think it's a beautiful description of what Christ is doing—that steadfast love and faithfulness will meet. The steadfast love of God and our trust in God will meet in him. And then righteousness and peace will kiss. What is a kiss? It's a moment of intimacy. Think about what God is saying through the psalm. As we recognize the rightness of our relationships through Christ, we will know peace intimately.

Just one more word about peace, because it's not just about ending up at a mountain lake and having it all pristine and beautiful. It is more dynamic than that. It's more like a symphony. I love going to a symphony and hearing the discord at the very beginning as everyone is tuning up, and then when the conductor comes in and as they all begin to work together, it turns into something beautiful and incredibly dynamic. That's what God's peace is about.

If music is not your thing, maybe sports are. Here's another approach. If you think about teamwork—and actually you can think about a work team, a sports team, whatever kind of team—when it comes together, when you recognize that you are actually working as a team, you realize there's something special. That's that moment of peace. It is, I believe, as we acknowledge Christ to be the real authority, realizing the partialness of our own authority, that we allow him to guide our feet to peace.

Prayer:

Lord, I started out with a question—do we want peace? I know I do, and yet I know the struggle with it—the struggle to let go of my own authority or the authority of others in my life and to acknowledge yours, to acknowledge that you will show me the way and that it is through justice and righteousness and your grace that we will know peace. Lord, lead us. Guide our feet in the way of peace. Amen.