

SERMON TITLE – “Blessed are the Peacemakers”

TEXT – Matthew 5

PREACHED AT – Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION

Well today we’re going to conclude our sermon series on the Beatitudes – this short, wonderful, bewildering, challenging section from the Sermon on the Mount. We’ve looked at a number of states of being that are described as “blessed.” Some seem to make sense to us, while we find others strange and unsettling. I want to emphasize something that I said at the beginning of last week’s sermon: the beatitudes are not a nine-step program to the good life! Jesus is not saying that if we can just master these nine techniques we will unlock the door to everything we’ve always wanted.

Rather, as we saw last Sunday, the beatitudes are an announcement that a new way of being in the world had begun in Jesus, that a new reality – the kingdom of God – was at hand, and that it would transform the world not through brute force or coercion but from “beneath.” In Mark 4:30-32, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a **mustard seed** which is the smallest of seeds, yet grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants. So too, the kingdom of God takes root in the small, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful... **the peacemakers**. The seemingly insignificant and powerless become the means by which the world is transformed.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

This morning we’re on our last beatitude:

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.

“Peace” is a word that gets thrown around fairly regularly, whether it’s in Christian circles or the broader culture in general. It’s an elusive word, one that can very easily be used as a polemical device to make oneself or one’s group appear virtuous and one’s enemies appear evil and dangerous. We see this happening in the United States election campaign right now. Republicans are painted as warmongers, Democrats are “for peace,” etc. “Peace” is a loaded word that is capable of being filled with either too much or not enough content—whatever happens to be politically or personally useful in order to further our own ends.

So what do *you* think of when you hear the word peace?

- The opposite of war? The absence of war?
- A symbol?
- A famous rock-star, using the stage to make a political statement?
- A bumper sticker on the back of someone's car?
- A bunch of burned-out hippies "making love not war" in a commune somewhere?

Perhaps your conceptions of peace are a little less exotic:

- A tranquil garden?
- Inner contentment with who you are?

Whatever you might think of when you hear the word "peace," and whatever notions our culture might have about it, "peace" seems to be one of those few words that evokes images of unqualified good.

Who doesn't want peace, after all? Many people—too many people—are willing to use violence to achieve peace, but there are precious few people who would say that they don't *want* peace.

Everyone along the spectrum from pacifism on the one end to Christian militarism on the other *wants peace*; they simply disagree about how peace is to be attained. You would be hard-pressed to find many people who would seriously say that they actively longed for chaos and violence (I saw a car the other day with a fish with horns and tail and the word "Satan" inside but even this person, I think, was guilty more of a silly attempt at being controversial than of actively seeking evil). Such people might be out there, but they are mercifully few.

So the vast majority of us *want* peace. But Jesus isn't just talking about *wanting* peace here; I think he assumes that we all want it, that it is a good thing for which we were created and toward which we ought to strive. The people whom he calls "blessed" are those who go out and make it happen.

PEACE: WHAT IS IT?

If we're to "make" peace, we ought to have some idea of what it is. It is important to understand that peace is more than just the absence of conflict—whether that's on the large scale of international foreign relations or the more mundane scale of our everyday relationships.

In the biblical view the absence of conflict is important, but so is the *presence* of human flourishing.

The Hebrew word which we translate "peace" is *shalom*—a rich, multi-dimensional word which incorporates harmony, beauty, unity, virtue, safety, security, and justice. It is more than a lack of hostility—although this is certainly a start and would be welcome in many parts of our world; it moves on to say what the world *should* look like. It presents a positive vision of a life where human beings live as they were intended to live with each other, under God.

Perhaps the most poetic and beautiful picture of this in Scripture comes from Isaiah 65:17-25. It's a long passage, but worth quoting at length:

¹⁷ *"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.*

¹⁸ *But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.*

¹⁹ *I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.*

²⁰ *"Never again will there be in it infants who live but a few days, or older people who do not live out their years; those who die at a hundred will be thought mere youths; those who fail to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.*

²¹ *They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

²² *No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.*

²³ *They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.*

²⁴ *Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.*

²⁵ *The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.*

This is a powerful vision of the future—one that goes way beyond the kind of vague pleas for tolerance and “live-and-let-live” that we are accustomed to hearing or the simple absence of war. It is a vision that would have been very familiar to Jesus and to his audience. This promise of God would have nourished and sustained Israel throughout their difficult history. This is the picture of the kingdom of God that Jesus claimed to himself be bringing about. And this is a picture of what the Beatitudes “way-of-being” in the world was to point to.

OUR SITUATION – A CONFLICTED WORLD

We live in a world of violence, not peace. It’s all we’ve ever been familiar with. For almost as long as human beings have been around and have had to live together, our planet has been characterized by conflict, chaos, disharmony, and violence.

There are pockets of peace, of course, whether these pockets are **geographic** ones (like Canada) or **chronological** ones (periods of history where war is absent) or **interpersonal** ones (where our own individual lives and the lives of those close to us are relatively free of conflict and pain), but overall we recognize that human history is a history of trouble and violence.

This was as true in Jesus’ day as it is in ours. Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God. Well, Israel was very aware of how kingdoms come into being: by force. And Jesus’ listeners would have been well-acquainted with this phenomenon. Prior to Jesus’ arrival on the scene, the Jewish people had been conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Romans. They had enjoyed a brief window of autonomy after a revolt led by the Maccabees, but this was short-lived. In each case, it was violence that brought a new reality into being. Jesus’ people knew very well that kingdoms were founded and maintained by violence. And to these people, Jesus says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Peace is something that we desperately need and long for, but it seems to lie beyond our grasp.

Our experience—as individuals with families and friends, as members of churches, as citizens of provinces and nations, global citizens—seems to lead to the conclusion that peace is an impossible ideal. When has peace ever been anything more than a brief experience in our world, after all?

This frustration between the ideal of peace and its lack of realization is captured in a song by U2 called “Peace on Earth”:

*Heaven on earth
We need it now
I'm sick of all of this
Hanging around*

*Sick of sorrow
I'm sick of the pain
I'm sick of hearing
Again and again
That there's gonna be
Peace on earth*

*Jesus in the song you wrote
The words are sticking in my throat
Peace on earth*

*Hear it every Christmas time
But hope and history won't rhyme
So what's it worth*

This peace on earth

There's a real sense of frustration here, isn't there? There's a deep longing for “heaven on earth,” an understanding that human beings were created for peace, not conflict. Yet there is an almost hopeless skepticism as well—“hope and history won't rhyme” and “peace on earth” seems like a hollow, meaningless phrase.

And what is true on a global level where there are always “wars and rumours of wars” is true in our own lives as well. The peace we want and need is elusive.

Our relationships with children, co-workers, parents, and friends (not to mention our enemies) are, at various points in our lives, characterized by mistrust, envy, defensiveness, antagonism, and selfishness. We have competing desires and expectations of each other, and these bump up against each other regularly.

Several hundred years ago, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes described human life together without a strong leader or “sovereign” to regulate their behaviour as “the war of all against all.”

We might not offer quite *that* bleak an assessment of human nature – many of us do enjoy seasons of relative peace and harmony in our relationships and many of us (certainly in Canada) are blessed to have lived an entire lifetime in a country free from war—but an inescapable element of the human condition on this side of eternity is conflict.

Peace on earth is something we long and hope for in the future, but we only get glimpses of it now. For some, those glimpses are few and far between, for others they are more frequent, but we all know that the peace that we were created for is something foreign to our experience and will only take place in another kind of reality.

PEACEMAKING AS AN ACT OF TRUST

Yet we are called to be peacemakers. **Fundamentally, choosing to be peacemakers is an act of trust.**

As is the case in all the beatitudes, the announcement that Jesus is making about the kind of people who are blessed, the kind of people who signal the kingdom of God, asks for a radical trust in God to usher in his kingdom in what seems to be counterintuitive ways.

It forces us to declare, by our actions as well as our words, that we believe that God really *does* stand over our individual stories and the larger stories in which we find ourselves; that he really *does* promise to deal justly with us and those we find ourselves in conflict with, that peace and love really *are* stronger than violence and hatred, no matter how things may appear in the present; that the upside-down way God has of working in the world really *is* right-side up and really *does* point to a future of *shalom*.

If God isn't who he says he is, it makes no sense to be peacemakers in the present or to take the beatitudes as a kingdom-way-of-being-in-the-world. **Only if a God of peace stands at the beginning and the end of history does it make sense to be peacemakers in the time between.**

CONCLUSION: HOW DO WE BECOME PEACEMAKERS?

As with all of the Beatitudes, we must remember that this is not just good advice but good news—a new possibility for the world being inaugurated in and through Jesus.

And we must also remember that these are not just words; Jesus not only preached the Sermon on the Mount, he lived it. He was poor in spirit, he mourned, he was meek, he hungered and thirsted after righteousness, he was merciful and pure in heart; he made peace—between God and human beings and between people; he was persecuted because of righteousness, he was insulted and had evil spoken of him falsely.

All of these things were part of Jesus' announcement that a new covenant between God and human beings was beginning with him. A new possibility had been introduced, and it was up to his followers to embody and point to these new possibilities.

So how can we be peacemakers? How can we embody this new possibility for the world, this new way of being human that Jesus points to here in the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes?

Most of us will not have the opportunity to influence the foreign policies of influential governments (although some might). For most of us, peacemaking will occur in the fairly “ordinary” contexts of everyday events and relationships. For most of us, peacemaking will involve doing what good we can in the contexts God has placed us, the doors he opens up for us, allowing the vision of Isaiah we read above to inform our words and actions.

TWO STORIES

John Ronald story:

- I was curious to hear about his time in Afghanistan—an interesting conversation during a week when I was thinking about Jesus' words on peace.
- Our talk turned to the overwhelming amount of suffering going on there, and so many other places in the world.
- What does it mean to think about peace in a place like this where there is so much injustice, so much violence and pain?
- His response struck me: as a doctor and a follower of Jesus, he simply tried to bring what good he could to a dire situation. He was a source of physical healing and restoration; he brought a little bit of light into a place of darkness.

Another story:

- Naomi used to work at a daycare. There was a little girl who came from a bit of a rough background that she took care of every day.
- This girl was born to a teenage mother who had very little interest in being a mother for her; she was mostly raised by her grandmother who lived in a cramped little place filled with older siblings, cousins, aunts, etc.
- Naomi developed a connection with this little girl and asked if she could take her home on weekends
- Her grandmother said yes and so this little girl would come to our house a couple of Sundays per month; she would come to church with us, go over to my parents farm and play around for the afternoon, she would come with us to the park; Naomi even found a way to get her brother to a Christian summer camp for a weekend.
- Thanks to Naomi's compassion, we were able to share a little bit of joy, fun, and hope with a family who might now otherwise have experienced it; she brought a little bit of light and peace into a dark place.

These stories are not meant to show how wonderful people John and Naomi are (although they are), but to demonstrate how the peace of Christ, the *shalom* that God promises and calls us to represent can be shown in the contexts God puts us in.

Being a peacemaker involves so much more than the absence of war, or being “against war.” It means working *for* God’s vision for his world.

It means having a clear, biblically-formed vision of the future God has promised and allowing that vision to permeate all of our actions, from the seemingly insignificant to those with global consequences.

- It means pursuing justice, wholeness, and harmony in our relationships, seeking reconciliation and restoration both when we wrong others and when they wrong us
- It means turning the other cheek, choosing to be wronged rather than be a source of enmity
- It means doing the hard work of reconciling with our enemies without resorting to violence
- It means getting involved politically and socially, promoting whatever peace can be achieved and always working for human flourishing in whatever context we find ourselves
- It means sacrificially pursuing the good of others, sometimes at personal expense.

Wherever we find ourselves there will be conflict, disharmony, fear, and confusion. Our job, as kingdom people, is to bear witness through our lives to the Prince of Peace because we believe that it is in living as Christ did that the world begins to be transformed into something beautiful and good and hopeful (like the vision we read in Isaiah).

We are not charged with the task of bringing the kind of peace that only God can bring; but we are called to embody, as in all the beatitudes, a kingdom-way-of-being-in-the-world.

We are called to be peacemakers because we are children of a God of peace. God's children do what God does, and **there is no more God-like work for us to do in the world than peacemaking.**

May God help us to be peacemakers this week, this year, and beyond.