

A Worry-Free Life; How to be a Peacemaker. Matthew 5:9, Romans 12:9-21, I Cor 6:7-8
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
Rev. Jamie White; Sept 24, 2023

We wrap up our short series on “A Worry-Free Life” this morning. We’ve spent the last three weeks talking about just how easy it is for us to get sucked into the worry game. It’s become so “normal” for us to be worried and anxious all the time, to be up in the middle of the night circling around all the “what ifs” of our life. And we worry about everything, don’t we? The little stuff like grocery lists, and traffic, and what we’re going to wear tomorrow. And about the big stuff too; like if our cancer is going to come back, or if we’re in the next round of layoffs at work, or how we’ll handle our parents dying, or if our child will ever get sober. So many things to worry about.

Yet, we know the worrying, it isn’t serving us. It doesn’t solve any of our actual problems, but only makes us feel more overwhelmed and afraid. We need peace so badly. So, we’ve talked the last couple weeks about the real and lasting peace that comes from God. We learned that God’s peace is so much broader, so much deeper than simply an absence of conflict, as the world defines it. It’s about more than just circumstantial feelings of peace, when everything just happens to be going right in our day. Real peace is understood as the Shalom of God. It’s about wholeness, integrity, and flourishing. God’s peace offers us a contentedness and a deeply rooted calm, even in the midst of trials, even when there is much that might worry us.

Last week Pastor Joe walked us into some of the practical ways we can hold onto to God’s peace, through some spiritual practices that root us in shalom. I would encourage you, if you missed a week, go to the sermon library on our church website to catch up. I’d especially nudge you to download the pdf of Joe’s sermon from last week, as he only preached half of it in order to save time, but included the rest of it in the printed text. And I want to make you a big promise; if were to you adopt *even one* of the spiritual practices that Joe talked about from the Paul’s recommendations in Philippians, you’d get a significant handle on your worry. You’d begin to experience God’s shalom in new and powerful ways. I promise you.

Now, so far, we’ve focused on giving up the worry game and receiving peace in an individual and personal way. And really, that’s the only place we can start, with our own life. But it’s also important that we don’t finish this series without turning our focus outward. Because Christ’s peace is not only an individual thing – my personal peace with God. It is also relational, social, and communal. And we know this... I mean, I would wager that a good portion of what you most worry about, probably comes down to conflicts and tension in your relationships. Peace is individual, but it’s also communal.

I’m sure we all know someone that is what I would call a “conflict magnet.” Someone that just seems to attract drama. No matter where they are, they just brim with tension and stress. It seems like they bring it wherever they go, thrive on negative energy, and only ever want to talk about what’s wrong. Do you know someone like this? Everything can be relatively calm, and everyone can be having a good time, but when this person shows up, the conversation always goes south, and pretty soon

everyone else is feeling worried and stressed out. It's brutal. Someone else's lack of peace can really impact the rest of us. Well, the inverse is also true. A person rooted in Christ's peace has a significant impact on those around them.

God dream is that we would all be at peace and all live in peace. Remember that when Jesus comes into the world the promise is for peace on earth and goodwill to ALL mankind. The peace of God is to spill out from us. We let go of worry and embrace real and lasting peace... and then we allow ourselves to be instruments of God's peace in this worry-filled world.

In Matthew 5, Jesus begins his famous Sermon on the Mount, with "the beatitudes" ... these are statements that tell us what real blessing and real happiness look like. As part of this list, Jesus says in Mt 5:9, "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**" I'm not sure peacemaker is a term we always understand. Friends, the most important thing about peacemaking is to never confuse it with peace-loving, or being a fan of peace, or thinking peace is probably a good idea. It's not enough to just like peace a whole lot. Blessed are the peace-makers. I appreciate how the New Living Bible translates this, "**God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.**" We are to work for peace, we are to make peace.

You're probably aware that the football season just started. We're big KC Chiefs fans in our house because Dave grew up there. My boys are obsessed. They've got the jerseys, and hats, and posters. They even have this stuffed animal they're convinced looks exactly like the Chief's coach, Andy Reid. They set up this stuffed animal to watch all the games with them, sort of like our family's good luck charm. Yes, it's ridiculous. We're all even in a fantasy football league. For those of you that don't know what fantasy football is... congratulations, you're a much healthier person. It's basically fake football to add to all the real football... because apparently games on Thursdays, Sundays, and Mondays just aren't enough.

But you know who the real heroes of football, and really any sports, are? The referees. Yep, they don't get any fancy press, we don't their names, and really, we only give them the time of day if they make a bad call. But the refs, they hold the game together through peacemaking. They don't just stand around and hope the game goes well. No, when players get out of line, they throw a flag. When a team breaks a rule, they blow that whistle and issue a penalty. If a fan is belligerent, they throw them out of the stadium. The referees ensure peaceful play can happen.

Peacemaking is active, often it requires engagement. It's not always about avoiding conflict. I know that there are a lot of folks who think keeping the peace means just letting sleeping dogs lie, it's about biting our tongue or keeping quiet... we even use that phrase "we're holding our peace." But peacemaking is never about sweeping the tension under the rug because we're desperate to avoid the distress of conflict. It's not about shoving our worries deep down because it seems easier to just ignore them rather than face them. That is not peacemaking. Sometimes we need to throw a flag or blow a whistle to ensure peaceful play can go on. Being a peacemaker will require that we confront our anxiety head on, that we name our worries out loud, that we face whatever it is that causes distress.

I want to share two biblical texts that get to the heart of peacemaking, that really anchor this concept. These two texts sort of act as boundaries that help hem in what we are called to as peacemakers. First, in Romans 12 Paul has this whole section about what it looks like to live as a follower of Jesus... and themes of peacemaking come up again and again and again. “Love one another with mutual affection... be patient in suffering... bless those who persecute you.... live in harmony with one another... do not repay anyone evil for evil... never avenge yourselves... if you’re enemies are hungry, feed them... overcome evil with good.” All good things, we’d agree. But there is this line in verse 18, that is absolutely essential for peacemaking... **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. -Romans 12:9**

Being a peacemaker, one who carries the shalom of God into this world, means that we are accountable for peace, so far as it depends on us. When the worries come—and they will... when conflicts arise in our homes—and they will... when the tension surfaces at work—and it will... when we recognize injustice happening around us—and we will... we choose to engage and do so with the intention of making peace, of bringing shalom. We don’t engage with the intention of being right, or getting our point across, or defending ourselves, or justifying our actions... but of making peace. And friends, here’s the truth, living at peace is terribly hard work. It is. It means we lead with grace and give folks another chance when they blow it, we pick up the phone to have that tough conversation even when we’d rather stew about it, we spend our time and energy working for justice, we courageously keep engaging in the work of healing, we refuse to gossip and speak ill of others. We work for peace.

But notice, Paul reminds us... as much as possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace. I appreciate Paul’s realism here... not everything will be able to be solved with our peacemaking... because not everyone is interested in making peace. Some folks are far more interested in conflict. Plenty of people make a living off injustice. That’s the reality. Friends, you’ve got to remember, the only person you can control is yourself. So, when the worries begin to surface, when a tense situation arises, when the conflict erupts, you ask yourself, what can I do to bring peace here? As far as it depends on me, how can I model shalom? And then you let the chips fall where they will. It might not always work, your efforts might not always be well-received, but that doesn’t really matter. You work for peace and trust God with the outcomes. *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* So, that’s one text I want you to hold tightly as you engage the work of peacemaking.

The other comes from I Corinthians 6, where Paul is actually disciplining a bunch of folks in that church for their lack of peacemaking. They’re picking a fight at every turn, nit-picking every possible conflict, and it’s gotten so bad, that they’re not even trying to resolve their conflicts peaceably anymore... they’re just taking each other to court and suing each other. Paul’s very disappointed and goes into a bit of rant about it... he ends by saying: **“The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters.”** - 1 Cor 6:7-8

Why not rather be wronged? Paul's making the point here that often the conflicts we spend so much of our energy worrying about, imagining all the things we should have said in that argument, or crafting the perfect mic-drop Facebook comment, or rehashing all the drama to our friends... so often, all that really does is bring us more pain. It just makes a bad situation even worse. It just escalates the conflict... and definitely causes more worry. *Why not rather be wronged?*

It's just not always worth it to get fired up and make a fuss about every possible injustice we experience. To read into every possible offense. Now I am not talking about being abused or oppressed... I'm talking about being offended, disgruntled, having our feelings hurt because our preferences were ignored, or our wishes were disregarded. Friends, being easily offended is not going to lead to a worry-free life, it's going to make us feel crazy. Often, the real wisdom of peacemaking, is knowing when to pick our battles, of refusing to die on every hill. Even the referees don't blow that whistle or throw that flag at every single thing. They've got to have the wisdom to know when a grievance is really worth stopping the game. So, friends, why not rather be wronged? That's a text worth holding tightly to.

You've probably noticed that I just presented you with two texts that serve as a dialectic here... two truths that seem to oppose each other. On the one hand, I'm telling you to do whatever you can, as far as it depends on you, to be at peace with everyone. To refuse to sweep your conflicts under the rug, and instead bravely name what's really going on. But on the other hand, I'm tell you to let your conflicts go, to decide that some things just aren't worth it... that sometimes, it's a lot less painful to just be wronged, and move on. And you're right... this is a dialectic... *two truths that seem to oppose each other but are both equally true at the same time*. We are called to spiritual maturity friends, to grow up in Christ, to wade into the tension between this dialectic, and to trust the Spirit to help us know when to go to the mat and when to let the offense roll off our back. Peacemaking will require both from us.

It will require that we referee... and that we do so with self-awareness, with humility, with generosity, and with love... that is our task. Will we do this perfectly? Of course not. Sometimes the ref makes a bad call and throws that flag at the wrong time. Sometimes the ref misses something important that really needed a whistle and probably deserved a penalty. But if we want to live our lives worry free, then figuring out how to be peacemakers is going to be part of it.

Our savior, Jesus Christ, he modeled this for us. There were many times Jesus was direct and confrontational (most often with the religious leaders), times he was absolutely unwilling to sweep anything under the rug, where he took great pains to point out what was really going on. He even flipped tables in the temple courts on one occasion. But then, there were many times, where he simply refused to engage the obvious conflict whatsoever, many times where Jesus was willing to just let the offenses go (which really infuriated his disciples). He went so far as to refuse to defend himself while on trial for his life. Being a peacemaker will demand different things from us, but we serve a God that modeled it at every turn, the prince of peace, who will lead us to do the same if we're willing to follow him. And when we do, do you know what people will say about us? They won't call us a conflict magnet,

or a drama queen... no, they'll call us children of God. Peacemakers, they look like Jesus. They don't spend their best energy worrying, they spend it making peace, spreading the shalom of God. Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called the children of God. May it be so for you and for me.

I close this morning by inviting you to join me in this stunning prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love;

for it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen