

"Seeking God's Wholeness"

Matthew 5:1-9

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Not long ago Evelyne and I were watching a DVD of *Firewall*, a film that was supposed to take place in Seattle. I was kind of excited about watching a movie filmed in a place I know well—even though I could tell it was filmed in Vancouver, because at least that's a nearby city in the Northwest. Right in the middle of it, the main characters take off, and supposedly headed out to the countryside near Seattle. Except they got in the car and started driving, and it looked more like the Nevada desert than it did the Pacific Northwest. I burst out, "Hey, what's that about? That's not Seattle." Evelyne goes, "Okay, fine." That kind of annoyed me, because I know Seattle, and a movie should look right. So I insisted, "No, it's not Seattle. It looks like Nevada, for crying out loud." And Evelyne said, "Whatever, it doesn't matter." Well, that's when we got in a ten-minute argument that ruined the rest of the movie. That was disappointing, because I was right and she was wrong.

But my point is, we all need help to be peacemakers. I do sometimes. Our selfish instincts are usually more concerned with being right than getting along. We all need help to be peacemakers in our relationships. Sometimes we see that in misunderstandings that are trivial, but also in ones that are traumatic, and we see that in broken relationships around us. We see it on the personal level and the pain it causes in broken relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and friends and neighbors. We see it on the broader scale. Just look at the news headlines about the war in the Middle East. How troubling it is. We want to say Lord, if we're going to be peacemakers, we need your help!

This morning's passage tells us God wants us to be peacemakers. That's a characteristic of God's own heart. See, part of the message of this morning is that you're not really in God's family if your attitudes and your actions are exactly like everybody else outside the family. You're not really God's son or daughter if your attitudes and actions, your lifestyle, your commitments, are exactly the same as everybody else. Another way to look at it is that you can't be saved without being transformed.

Now it's important, I think, to notice that this challenge to a new kind of living comes at the point that it does in the Beatitudes. After all, as we saw in the Beatitudes in the fall, it's like Jesus is saying: if these Beatitudes describe your condition, you are blessed, you're well off, you're lucky. And it's important to see that "blessed are the peacemakers" it comes at this point in the Beatitudes.

It's because the first four Beatitudes make clear that God gives his blessing for what we lack; they're about the qualities we *don't* have. That's what poverty is, *lack* of something—and Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, those who hunger and thirst, those who are meek"—in other words, those who lack

power. The first four Beatitudes tell us God blesses you when you're empty, when you need him. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." We're saved by grace through faith, by nothing that we do, and God blesses us.

But now the second four Beatitudes tell us how to live, because they're about our gratitude in response to Grace. They're about how God blesses us in what he calls us to do and be. God's blessings are for people who become new from the inside out. God says this morning: "I want to give you a new heart. I want to make you new and fresh from the inside out, and when you let me do that and my Holy Spirit begins to change your character, I'm going to bless you." God's blessings are for people who become new from the inside out.

So look at how the characteristics pile up: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." And now, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." See, all of the words picture the salvation that God has in store for "those who love him, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Jesus says God wants to make us new persons. And otherwise we don't have a place with him. We aren't saved. That's why Jesus says later in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, you'll never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

I think of the book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and it describes that journey. Of course, it's an allegory for the faith. The pilgrim's name is Christian, and he stands for all of us who follow Jesus. It's not enough for Christian to believe in Jesus, he has to follow, to make his way toward the Celestial City. On the way, he finds that there are paths that veer off to the left and to the right, but the narrow path, that's the one on the high ridge that he has to stick to. On one side there's danger, and off on the other side there's destruction; it's like that for us too, isn't it? See, we've got to choose to walk on the narrow path, and then we'll make it through life's dangers, toils, and snares. Our righteousness, our life choices, have to be authentic. It can't just be lip service.

Here's something important we've got to understand. When Jesus tells us that it's blessed to be peacemakers, he isn't telling us how to *become* children of God. He's telling us what it's like to *be* children of God. He's describing the children of God that will be welcomed home into the Father's house in the end. Look how John says it in the opening of his gospel. He says about Jesus,

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (John 1:11-13)

Paul says the same thing in Galatians,

So that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. (Galatians 3:22)

Then he concludes,

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26)

See, we don't *become* God's children by being peacemakers, or merciful, or anything else, but if we are God's children, we begin to grow into these characteristics, so they become an intrinsic, basic, joyful part of our Christian walk. We become children of God by trusting in Christ, by saying, "God, I'm sorry for my sins. Thank you for dying for me. Please give me the power to live for you." It's making Jesus the forgiver of your sins and the leader of your life. And Jesus is saying, this morning, people who have become children of God have more and more his characteristics.

Once when we were God's enemies, at war with him, and he made peace by the blood of Christ and declared that we were free from all charges, anybody who puts their trust in Jesus. And so now what God loves, we love, which is anything that shows his glory. Now what God hates, we hate, which is anything that dehumanizes or diminishes people made in his image. He's a God of peace, and Jesus is the Prince of Peace, so, we are growing to be peacemakers. Like Paul says in another place in Galatians,

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." (Galatians 4:6)

God has made us into his sons and daughters through faith in Jesus. We don't earn our status as children of God, but once we are his children by faith we have his Spirit, and a fruit of the Spirit is peace. From start to finish, it's all grace.

See, later in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus talks more about making peace. He says,

You've heard that it was said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good. (Matthew 5:43-45)

That's grace. "He sends rain on both the just and the unjust." That's grace again. See, if we want to show we're children of God, we show grace. We make for peace. We love our enemies and we pray for people who hurt us and persecute us. In fact, that's going to be the next Beatitude, the very next verse.

For me, this comes out in the comic books and in the movie series *The X-Men*, the story about a bunch of mutants are attacking humanity because they want to defend their rights. But one little group of them,

the X-men, follow Dr. Xavier. They decide they're going to use their special mutations, or powers, in order to bless, in order to save human beings. Even if those human beings fear mutants and seek to destroy them. Like Jesus says, peacemaking is showing love, and overcoming hatred.

It's interesting to me what Jesus doesn't say is a sign of being God's children. He doesn't say it's that we have powerful spiritual gifts. Yes, we do have spiritual gifts as Jesus' followers, but it's not what he points to here. He doesn't say that those who are children of God are powerful in their worship. Yes, it's important to have excellence in worship. But the characteristic that he names here is peacemaking. So I want to say three things about what that means.

First, Peace Means Making Whole.

It seems to me that this ties right back into the Old Testament. The Old Testament word for peace is *shalom*. A lot of times we think of peace just in terms of a cease-fire. Get the guns to be quiet and maybe that's the best we can hope for. God's vision for peace is so much bigger, and the Old Testament word is a comprehensive word. It has to do with caring for one another. To really bring peace means to bring community, and that's why peacemakers are reconcilers. It's well-being, it's healing, and it's healthy relationships. Making peace means making whole. That's why peace has to do with the circles of daily life, with our family, our congregation, our community.

Second, peace means taking the initiative.

Jesus says in chapter 5,

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

I think that's very interesting. He doesn't say: "If you remember you've done something wrong, if you're holding a grudge, go and work it out." No, he says: *you remember somebody has something against you*. That means you don't worry about whether or not you think it's your fault, you go and make it right. He says, "First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift." It's so easy to deceive ourselves, and to say, "I'm not angry," when I really am. Jesus is sensitizing our hearts. Often the conviction that we need to work something out with a brother or a sister comes when we are being quiet before the Lord in a time of prayer. The Holy Spirit convicts us and says, "Work it out." When the Holy Spirit nudges, don't sit around, but act. When we trust God and act, we give him the opportunity to bring healing to a relationship. So, peace means taking the initiative.

Third, peace needs to be in the right order.

It's like Paul says in Romans chapter 12: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." That's a strong statement, *with all*. But it comes with the double caveat, "if possible," and "so far as it depends on you." Do all you can. Work for reconciliation. But know that there are times when God calls you to take a stand that causes division. Jesus said, "Do you think that I came to bring peace on Earth? No, I tell you, but division."

Sometimes we read that and it sticks in our craw. What, Jesus? Really? You came to bring division? Well, yes, because when you do the right thing sometimes there's going to be a strong reaction against it. Jesus is simply saying that he's the great dividing line. He demands a response, and sometimes standing for the truth causes division. The truth can never be set aside for the sake of unity, because that's a false unity. That's why the vow our elders and deacons take is to "work for the peace, unity, and purity of the church." Work for peace. Pray for your enemies. Act for their good. Watch God overcome barriers. But you can never abandon your commitment to purity, to Jesus and to his word, come what may.

So if you live like a Christian, that will soften a lot of hearts when people see God's love in action. But every once in a while standing up for what's right is going to provoke suspicion, or anger, or defensiveness. And maybe that's why Jesus says, in the very next Beatitude, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The first priority is righteousness, doing what's right, and then it's peace. Like James says, "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving" (James 3:17). Look at the order. You can't compromise purity in order to make peace.

Now, maybe you think that personally being a peacemaker is a little thing in light of the great conflicts of our world. But Jesus' words suggest that if there's to be peace between nations then people need new hearts, and that there's no bigger issue than whether a person finds new life and gains an eternal home with God. Everything else flows out of that. So personal issues aren't little at all, and if you want to be a part of God's family, if you want to have a home with him come judgment day, then you have to let God make you a new creature. You have to let him give you a new heart. You have to become fresh and new from the inside out. And without a heart that longs for peace, that makes for peace, we can't be children of God, and you know what? That's the biggest issue of all. When we make peace with others we show we've enjoyed peace with God ourselves.

Blessed are you peacemakers, who pray for your enemies, who meet your adversaries with love, like your heavenly Father does, who work for wholeness, who take the initiative, who put peace in its right order, because you will be God's children, and, Jesus says, you're going to inherit eternal life.