

Peace on Earth #3
Peace Makes Us One
Luke 2:11-12, Ephesians 2:13-22, John 14:27
12/18/16

- Duke University did a study on "peace of mind." Through their research of a wide variety and number of different people, eight factors were narrowed down to contribute greatly to emotional and mental stability. The more factors you possess, the more peace of mind you have. They are...
 - 1) The absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge was a major factor in unhappiness.
 - 2) Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.
 - 3) Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change. Cooperate with life, instead of trying to run away from it.
 - 4) Force yourself to stay involved with the living world. Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress.
 - 5) Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.
 - 6) Cultivate the old-fashioned virtues--love, humor, compassion and loyalty.
 - 7) Do not expect too much of yourself. When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable.
 - 8) Find something bigger than yourself to believe in. Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness.

- Those all make sense, right? Not one of those were surprising to me, like duh! I never thought of that one! I think for most people, all of those would make sense and we could agree and see how those factors would bring peace of mind. They are common sense.
 - Yet, so many live without peace. And, it doesn't take a terrorist threat to throw off your peace. Or a volatile election season.
 - There's a home somewhere where the Mom and Dad aren't getting along. They've been threatening divorce, and neither of them really wants it, but they don't know how to get the fighting to stop. Neither do their kids.
 - There's a guy in high school. He's feeling pretty harassed and pushed around by the worry of what everyone thinks of him. Meanwhile, he's still trying to figure out what he thinks of himself.
 - There's a man at a job he really doesn't like. It's stressing him out as the company puts more and more on him and expects him to just keep doing it.
 - There's a single mom, trying to make the finances work out. She didn't plan for her life to be this way, but it is.

- There's an elderly lady, living by herself. Her family doesn't really keep track of her very well, and her retirement isn't going to last. Life seems to have fewer reasons for her to have peace.
 - This morning, how at peace are you? How much "peace of mind" do you possess? Maybe you're even trying to live with those factors in your life, but it's not working completely.
- And you hear the Christmas bells are ringing "Peace on earth, goodwill to men." And you think "What?" Is Christmas peace some kind of delusional escape? Some kind of head-in-the-sand idealism? I don't think so. There's got to be more.
- That's why the whole advent theme leading to Christmas has been "Peace on Earth." Indeed, our whole purpose as a church is to share the peace of Christ.
 - The reason is because peace is so very needed and so sought after. But, for many, many people it is very illusive. People are searching for peace in hobbies, entertainment, interests, careers, relationships...yet, they are coming up short.
 - Peace, real peace, is a gift given by the Prince of Peace, Jesus. Hear his words to you this morning from John 14:27, *"I am giving you a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift that the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."*
- Did you get what Jesus said? Peace is not from the world or from anything we will find in the world. Peace is not a signed decree, but a person. Peace is not something we talk about or research, peace is practical. Peace is not a thought or idea, peace is a lived out reality. Peace is not invisible, but visible through action.
 - That's why our purpose is to share the peace of Christ. We are called to be people of peace in order to show others that peace is possible through peace with God. So, two weeks ago, we talked our call to be peacemakers.
 - Then, last week we talked about true peace lights up the darkness in our lives and pierces the shadows of injustice and oppression that exist around us. When the light of peace is shown, we are called to do something and seek reconciliation.
 - I have said before and I will continue to say it – I believe the greatest strength of our church is that we are multicultural. Being multicultural isn't always easy. It means there are more differences of opinions, experiences and outlooks at times. But, being multicultural is a reflection of the peace of Christ and how it is only through the peace of Christ that this is possible.
- Now, maybe some folk are thinking that I've been focusing a lot on race the past few weeks and being multicultural. I don't think so. The peace of reconciliation is not just something you touch on every one in a while to cross of the list.
 - Instead, it is a focus you have, a lifestyle you live and relationships that you seek to nurture. That's what peace is. See, peace is all about relationships. Peace is completely relational and is only understood through the bonds of love.

- Long ago, there was a man who was looking for a picture that could adequately capture peace. He looked far and wide and found nothing that really captured peace. He even held a contest, inviting artists to give it their best shot at capturing peace.
 - **Luke 2:11-12**, I think, gives the best picture of peace. Let's read it.
 - The baby Jesus, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. Picture it. That's peace. It's peace because the God of the universe left his throne in heaven to come to earth to be in relationship with us because he was compelled by his great love for humanity.
 - And, in that picture of a peaceful baby who came to give us peace through a relationship with him, still we know that peace was not the reality for the world swirling around him. He came in the midst of a time, like ours, where peace was hard to come by and to a people who didn't see their purpose as to share the peace of God with the world. Instead, they did much to divide the world.

- The good news about Jesus was first given to the Jewish people. They were looking for the Promised One of God, the Messiah, to arrive, and for the Jews to learn that Jesus was that Promised One made for a very natural and wonderful transition in their relationship with God. But many of the Jews didn't see any room for non-Jews in God's plan. Or, if there was room, it was as 2nd rate members.
 - Feelings between Jews and non-Jews have often been tense. That didn't just start happening in the past 100 years! It was very much in play during the 1st century as Rome held the Jews under its thumb. There was no love lost from the Jews toward their oppressors.
 - So, it kind of makes sense that an oppressed and conquered people would take that which they did have – being the people of God – and hoard it or hold it over other people. They might not have political power or economic power, but they had God on their side and that made them better.
 - It was reflected even in their laws. From the Talmud, which is the official body of Jewish civil and religious law, one of the man-made laws was that a Jewish man must pray every morning, "Blessed be the Lord for not making me a Gentile." Gentile simply was anyone who wasn't a Jew. Talk about ingraining prejudice into people!
 - Another law was that "the daughter of an Israelite may not assist a gentile woman in childbirth, since she would be assisting to birth a child for idolatry." It would be better for the child or mother or both to die than to have another Gentile be born.

- The twisting of God's Word has happened for thousands of years! As humans, we have this tendency to elevate ourselves and those like us while putting down those who are different from us and the twisting of God's Word to justify it. That wasn't God's design. That's our human nature. That's our sinfulness coming through. That's why we needed the Prince of Peace to come – to make us one.
 - Paul, to the church in Ephesus, talks about this plan of peace to make us one in **Ephesians 2:13-22**. Let's read it together.

- Paul wrote this letter years after the peaceful scene of Christmas. The Prince of Peace had come, lived, died and rose again to bring salvation to everyone. And, the gospel of Jesus was being taken outside of Israel. Cities and colonies all over the Roman kingdom were full of non-Jews, and as the Church grew, these people found themselves being invited to become Christians.
 - o But, for years, they had been hearing how the God of the Jews had no place for them. The separation was social, physical, religious, national, and racial. And, many of the Christians who had previously been Jews made it clear that the non-Jewish people just weren't on the same level when it came to being OK in God's eyes.
 - o This is what was happening in Ephesus, a Roman city, where many of its non-Jewish residents had become followers of Jesus. So, Paul writes a beautiful letter to encourage them in the faith and with the fact that God fully accepts those who were once considered outsiders.
 - o And it also urges those who were insiders not to hold their status over anyone else.

- Let's look back over it again:
 - o In v13 – he reminds the Gentile believers that they were far away, but they have been brought near
 - o In v 17 – Paul said that he came and preached peace to you who were far away
 - o Because they believed, v19 says - you are no longer foreigners and aliens
 - o These Gentiles – non-Jews – were previously outsiders in things relating to God. That would also be true of probably all of us here today. (I don't know of anyone here today that was born Jewish.)
 - o We could read these words as Gentiles today and find a lot of joy and comfort in the fact that God has also made a way for us to be a part of His Kingdom – just like those Ephesians. They needed to be reminded that they could be accepted, they could be on the inside, just as much as anyone else.

- But in reminding the Gentiles who they are now in Christ, Paul is also reminding those who always thought they were insiders, the Jewish believer that the status they once exclusively enjoyed, is now meant for all people who believe.
 - o I wonder what it would have meant for those people who were insiders, with a 2,000-year heritage of being God's chosen people. What would it have been like for those insiders to read about how God accepts into His Kingdom even people who are far off? What would it have been like to read about the end of your mistaken right to look down on everyone else?

- Ephesians is written to "outsiders." In our time, the outsiders, are those who still are far off. Or maybe they are those who are trying to find their way to God, but they find that sometime, we insiders, get in the way.
 - o See, this dynamic is still at work today. Those of us who have been in the church for a long time, have a tendency to think that people must conform to how we are in order to come to Christ. You know, they should do church like we do, have a church building like we do, sing the same songs we do.

- But, that's not what Ephesians is saying. I think we could probably gain more insight from this if we would flip it around and think of ourselves as the insiders who sometimes need to be convinced that others have been allowed to be a part of this too.
- See, Jesus has a plan for peace on earth. It starts with us having peace with him. Then, it extends to us having peace with each other by getting rid of all of our preconceived understandings of how to be and look like a Christian and instead truly becoming one people who are united through Jesus
 - Finding peace with Jesus is often the easy part. It's being truly at peace with other people that takes some doing. But, that's exactly when peace goes from an idea to a way of life.
- Through these verses, we see that Jesus makes us one through some very specific actions. He does this first by taking away privilege and exclusivism. All are equal.
 - The temple in Jerusalem was surrounded by several courtyards. Only priests could enter the innermost courtyard. Men only could go as far as the courtyard outside that, then the women.
 - Then, that courtyard was surrounded by a wall to keep out the non-Jews. There are 2 stones surviving today from this wall. They're known as the "Thanatos stones," after the Greek word for death. That's because of the message inscribed on them, accented with red paint, translates into something like: "No man of alien race is to enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for the penalty of death that follows."
 - If you'd been in the temple, you knew about that dividing wall, and the threat of what would happen if you dared to cross over it. Can you imagine the attitude that some Jewish people, even Jewish Christians would have had ingrained toward non-Jews?
 - Paul says that Jesus has destroyed the barrier between Jews and non-Jews – between the insiders and the outcasts – by rendering the Law useless. No longer would outsiders be outsiders, because no longer was the Old Covenant the key to a person's relationship with God. Jesus brought something new – something that God always had in mind.
- I want us to make it a bit more personal, now. We obviously don't have inner courts or walls around the sanctuary where non-Christians must stay out. But, think about our attitude, sometimes. Think about this. Do you realize how much potential we have to make people on the outside, those who might be far from God, feel like they can't fit in with us?
 - See, we know one another. Some, a lot of you, are related, and some others you have known for years. We have stories that can go back to the middle 1900s, right? I've been told many of the stories of the old saints that have come before and the stuff that used to be done. This church has been around for almost 90 years.

- You know your way around the building. You have the spot where you usually sit. You know the schedule. And you have your life all together...at least, it appears to others that you do.
- Now, not one of those things is a bad thing. Many of those things have helped you grow in your faith.
 - The problem is when we get so entrenched in those things that they start to make others feel like they could never fit in – kind of like a Gentile in 1st century Ephesus.
 - The result is a loss of peace between us and anyone who has yet to be a part of us. There's a wall, a barrier, even though we try not to build it. It's in our attitude and expectation for people to adapt to us rather than us share the peace of Christ with them.
 - But, Jesus came to bring peace between people, and one way He came to do that was by taking down the things that we tend to set between us.
- We don't have to abandon all traditions, all words that someone might not understand, all music, or get rid of the building. But we do need to be intentional about helping people see that they belong with us. We need to be intentional to teach people what some of our stuff means. And, we have to be willing to give up some of our preferences so we can reach people of today.
 - You might get that done by just striking up a conversation with your neighbor you haven't met, or by inviting a co-worker to a LIFE Group. You might get it done by letting someone who feels like he could never be good enough to follow Jesus that you're in the same boat, and then explain what grace means!
- Over the past few years, we have been inviting people over to our house for dinner. We were calling it Supper at the Sagesse's. Several of you have been over for dinner. For the any who haven't – don't worry you'll get your turn...eventually.
 - One month, we invited a couple to come over – Sue Grandchamp and her husband, Gator. Sue's husband was a little nervous about coming over, you know, to the pastor's house. He had been to church for some special events. I have met him and have been to their house as well. He came with us to the New York trip we did several years ago. Still, coming to the pastor's house for dinner seemed formal.
 - Sue assured him that "Pastor Angela and Pastor Wil aren't like that." That we are just normal people.
 - So, when they came to our house and it was all about make yourself at home, serve yourself from the dishes the food was cooked in, informal – he was able to relax. When we just talked about normal stuff, he was able to relax. When our kids were loud, as usual, he could relate.
 - Sue told me after that he really enjoyed himself and he really liked getting to know us. He and Wil hit it off.
- Listen, by nature, I'm an informal kind of gal. Most days, you will find me in jeans. I even wear jean skirts! I don't care too much about what I'm going to wear. Shoot, I get wrinkles

out of clothes not with an iron, but with a spray bottle of water. I will never be all that fashionable. I'm not here to put on airs or try to be someone else or to be someone that others think I should be. Ain't nobody got time for that.

- And, I'll tell you who really doesn't have time for that – people who are far away from Christ. So, I am also intentionally informal. See, I want to reflect a Jesus who is relatable. I want to reflect a Jesus who is approachable. I want people to see that I'm just a person, like them. I have made mistakes and I continue to. I want people to see transparency and realness. I'm just a regular person who was redeemed by an amazing love. Because of that redemption, I have peace.
 - And so, ya'll have seen me get frustrated with my kids. You have seen me stumble and stammer over words. And, if you have come over to our house, you have probably left with dog hair all over you from our dog, Mollie, who's personal mission is to get petted by every person who walks in the door.
 - If someone thinks that makes me less than pastoral – so be it. I'll just point them to a baby who was born in a barn, with the animals and laid in a manger. People thought he was less than Messiah-like, but he was most certainly the Messiah, God with us.
- The peace that comes to save us does not emerge from those in society who have influence, wealth and power. If we are looking to the government and people in power to help us attain peace in this country or in the world, we will be waiting for a long time because they haven't been able to do it since the dawn of time!
- Instead, real peace was ushered in by Jesus in the most humble way for a reason. He wanted to destroy this idea that he was exclusive or that he came just for a few. Like I said last week, he destroyed our societal rules and expectations and ideas of privilege. He did it all the time. He did it to bring real peace between us by showing us that we are all the same.
- Because Jesus shows us that we are all the same, another way that Jesus brings peace between people is by meeting our universal need - forgiveness through His blood. We all are in need of something we will never attain on our own.
- When the Ebola virus swept over Liberia and other countries of West Africa in 2014, it didn't matter if a person was a citizen of Sierra Leon or an American healthcare worker. Anyone who was infected had the same life-threatening condition. The seriousness of the situation was the same for every infected person.
 - Sin is much like that – except that we're all infected. No matter how good anyone might be, the fact is we all have the same problem. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That means when we stand before the Lord, we are all in trouble if we are banking on our deeds because sin taints them all and separates us from God.
 - Every one of us needs the forgiveness that Jesus paid for on the cross – American or not, old or young, naughty or nice, gang banger, college student, retired widow, bank president, or blue collar worker.

- You know, when you are in need, you will do anything to get that need filled. I'm not talking about a want, I'm talking about a basic need.
 - o People who would never share a glass with anyone will drink from the same dipper with everyone when they're dying of thirst.
 - o Well, Jesus is the living water, and He's the only way for us not to die of thirst. When we see ourselves as someone who's going to die of thirst, and everyone else is being offered the same water, we're going to care less about whether or not we feel comfortable sharing the dipper.

- I have a friend who is pastor in a church in Mississippi. We met each other through a pastor's retreat. Several years ago, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and has been fighting it ever since.
 - o At some point after her first round of chemotherapy and the cancer returning, she was referred to the Cancer Centers of America. The one closest to her is in Atlanta, GA. So, every few months she has to travel and spent some extended time in Atlanta undergoing treatment.
 - o She shares that one of her richest blessings going through this experience was that she has met a lot of people who are going through the same thing. She has developed relationships with people she never would have otherwise – people who are so different from her.
 - o Yet, they share the same need – they need healing from a disease that is trying to take their lives.

- We all need healing from the disease of sin that is trying to take our very lives. Sin is trying to keep us separated from God and from one another. Those of us who have found the cure in Jesus must never forget that we were once very sick, sin-sick.
 - o We have to develop relationships with others who have found the cure of Jesus, yes. But, we must never forget that there are others who are looking for the cure. They are looking for it in many ways – ways that might even disturb us or ways that we don't completely understand.
 - o Yet, nothing should separate us as peace sharers because we know relationship is exactly what Jesus did with us so that we could be one with him. We must be one with others to nurture peace between us.

- Finally, Jesus makes peace between us by making and proclaiming the same offer to everyone. You know, we like to categorize things and even people and even sins.
 - o You know, some sins are big, right? Some sins, well, they are more acceptable or can be overlooked a little more. We know that's not what God's Word says. Sin is sin and it all separates us from God and takes our peace away.
 - o It takes away peace with each other as well because when we look at people and their sin, we begin to rank people's right to salvation or their likelihood of salvation. And, surely, a person who has sinned – really big time sin kind of sinned – they aren't going to get the same from God as someone who has known God and served him with their whole lives, right?

- But, let's look at what God is offering for everyone to become today:
 - o v19. Citizens – no longer foreigners and aliens. No longer just a green card. You get to be part of God's Kingdom!
 - o v19. Member of God's family! You're not just a guest around a table or someone invited overnight. You belong to this family! You have refrigerator rights!
 - o vv20-22. God's holy temple – the word here is the one more often used of the innermost part of the temple – the most holy place – where God lives!
 - o This invitation to become all these things is issued to every person, just the same, regardless of how close or far off they were before. Once we turn to Jesus, we become all of these things! Isn't that amazing?!

- My mom worked in a Children's Home in the town where we lived for nearly 15 years. When I was in college, there were two 14 year old boys in the home not because of anything they had done, but because their parents basically didn't want to deal with being parents. They were nice boy and their stories pulled at my mom's heart.
 - o So, she and my father became their foster parents. The boys were the same age as my youngest brothers, Dennis and Danny, who are twins. So, for a period of time, they had four teenage boys, all the same age, living in the house and eating everything!
 - o Now, what kind of foster parents would they have been had they given me and my brothers, their biological children, more than what they gave to our foster brothers? To this day, they still give to those boys and their families the same as they give to us. One of them, once he turned 18, left my parents' home and didn't contact them for years. He has since reached out and they welcomed him, again, with open arms, as their son.

- That's what God is offering to every person – no matter what. And, he wants to extend that to everyone – no matter how far off. We need to remember that in every single interaction we have with people. God wants them as his family, citizens of heaven.
 - o They might be annoying, weird, disheveled, unkind, inappropriate, hardened and maybe a whole list of other things, but God wants them. So should we. Is that hard to extend that to those who are hard to deal with? Sure. That's where peace come in, right? That's when peace becomes relational, as Jesus always meant it to be.

- This morning, are you living in peace with others? Are you accepting others? How might God want to use you to bring peace through the way you relate to others and embrace others?
 - o God wants to bring peace to the world one relationship at a time. And, he wants to use us to do it.