

Psalm 34:1-14

Philippians 4:4-7

September 11, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Words to Live By in Times Such as These

LET PEACE BEGIN WITH US

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Fifty weeks ago today, on Friday, September 25, 2015, Pope Francis presided over a Multi-Religious Gathering at Ground Zero in New York City. Following a welcome of the Pope by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove and Imam Khalid Latif shared reflections on the significance of the gathering at the site of the World Trade Center bombings on 9/11/01.

When the rabbi and imam finished speaking, Pope Francis offered a Prayer for Remembrance. In his prayer, the pope said: “God of peace, bring your peace to our violent world: peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth. Turn to your way of love those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred and who justify killing in the name of religion. Comfort and console us, strengthen us in hope, and give us the wisdom and courage to work tirelessly for a world where true peace and love reign among nations and in the hearts of all.”

Following the pope’s prayer, representatives of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, and Muslim faiths offered meditations on peace. Then Cantor Azi Schwartz sang the Jewish Prayer of the Deceased. The pope then shared his own reflections about the tragic events of 9/11. At the close of the service, the Young People’s Chorus of New York City sang

*Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me;
let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.*

With God our creator, family all are we.

Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.1

Jill Jackson wrote those words in 1955. Her husband, Sy Miller, whom she had married in 1949, wrote the melody. She attempted suicide in 1944. Surviving that suicide attempt, she said, “I knew for the first time unconditional love — which God is. You are totally loved, totally accepted, just the way you are. In that moment I was not allowed to die, and something happened to me, which is very difficult to explain. I had an eternal moment of truth, in which I knew I was loved, and I knew I was here for a purpose.”

“Let There Be Peace On Earth” was introduced at a youth retreat in California in 1955. The young people on the retreat represented many different religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The week-long conference was designed to help them

develop friendships and understanding through activities and discussions. Sy Miller wrote about that retreat experience, “One summer evening in 1955, a group of 180 teenagers of all races and religions, meeting at a workshop in the California mountains locked arms, formed a circle and sang a song of peace. They felt that singing the song, with its simple basic sentiment — ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me’ - helped to create a climate for world peace and understanding.”²

To paraphrase both the song and the Apostle Paul, “Let there be peace in your hearts and let it begin with God.” That’s certainly what Paul meant when he wrote to the Philippian Christians, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” When you hear those words, you might be reminded of Jesus’ words to his disciples on the night he was betrayed: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Easier said than done, you might think. But consider what Paul wrote to his beloved brothers and sisters in Philippi and where he was when he wrote to them. “Rejoice in the Lord, always (or in all circumstances); again I will say, Rejoice. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

What did Paul have to rejoice about? It certainly wasn’t the circumstances in which he found himself. After all, he was languishing in a Roman prison. The Roman prison in which Paul awaited his death was probably located twelve feet below ground, accessed through a hole in the ground. At the bottom of the shaft was a 6.5 foot high, 30 foot long, 22 foot wide room into which prisoners were thrown. A door led from this room into the main sewer of Rome, which emptied into the Tiber River. Sallust, a Roman politician and historian, described the prison’s appearance as “disgusting and vile by reason of the filth, the darkness, and the stench.”³

It’s hard to imagine that Paul rejoiced because he found himself in such horrific conditions. However, we know from stories in Acts that Paul and Silas were able to sing hymns and praise God while in prison. Paul’s joy and peace did not come from his circumstances, nor did they come from his own emotions or best efforts. Instead, Paul lived his life according to the benediction he shared with the Christians at Thessalonica (which is the margin note next to the Benediction in today’s bulletin): “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all.” (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

Paul wrote about peace from a prison cell where he awaited capital punishment by the Roman Empire, which touted a 200 year span of *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace. However, this “Romans Peace” was maintained through violence and conquest. As one person put it, “Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but the rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist.” The inhabitants of the city of Rome and Roman citizens may have enjoyed this “Roman Peace,” but the conquered peoples did not fare as well. A Roman senator named Tac-

tus, who served in one of Rome's many provinces, wrote, "They make a desolation and call it peace."⁴

The way our world is today, peace that is nothing more than the absence of war would be most welcome around the globe. Yet, that kind of peace is fragile, doesn't seem to last very long, and can exact a great cost from the peacemakers. Each year on December 10, the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to an individual or group that meets the criteria stipulated in Alfred Nobel's will: "the person who in the preceding year shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." When I was a kid, I thought it was called the *Noble* Prize — and that's not a bad description, for certainly the winners of the *Nobel* Prize do noble work. But, as noble and necessary as their work is, that kind of peace is the kind that the world gives.

There are so many ways to say "peace" — *paz* in Spanish; *mir* in Russian; *amani* in Swahili; *pace* in Italian; εἰρήνη in Greek. Perhaps you know the Hebrew word without even knowing that it means "peace" — *shalom*. But *shalom* is far more than the absence of war or the cessation of hostilities or a tense truce or a temporary ceasefire or a complete conquest of your enemies so they can no longer threaten you. *Shalom* means peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility.

That's the kind of peace Paul wrote about and demonstrated in his life, in all circumstances. *That* kind of peace, truly, "surpasses all understanding" because it is from God. When I was learning grammar and how to write, I was taught never to begin a sentence with the conjunction "and." However, Philippians 4:7, which describes the surpassing peace of God, does exactly that. "And" is an important connecting word that tells us how we can access God's peace for our hearts and minds. Listen again: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God AND the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

Notice that Paul doesn't say "Do not worry about anything [period]." Instead, he encourages the believers to take their requests, prayers, and supplications to God with thanksgiving. Another way to say it is, "Don't be **anxious** about anything . . ." There's a big difference between being concerned about something and trying to do something about it and being anxious and worrying about what might or might not happen. As someone has pointed out, considering Paul's circumstances under guard in a Roman prison, it's somewhat ironic that he uses a military term to describe God's peace in our lives: the peace of God "will stand sentry watch" over your hearts and minds. Because God's peace is on sentry duty and watching over us, "Christians and the church do not have to be anxiously scanning the horizon for new threats. Alert, yes; anxious, no."⁵

You don't even have to be a true cynic to wonder about the possibility of peace in the world. It's been sixty-one years since those 180 young people stood in a circle on a mountain in California and sang, "Let there be peace on earth." But there is still no

peace, at least not the kind of peace we all hope and pray for. So, it might be tempting to throw up our hands in despair and ask, “What’s the use?”

Paul, however, encouraged the Philippians believers and all of us to persevere in the peace and hope of God. Philippians 4:5 says, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” The meaning of that word “gentleness” is hard to convey in English. It means something like kindness or forbearance or graciousness. In other words, Paul means how **we** live as believers in Jesus Christ can make a difference for other people. Our gentleness, kindness, forbearance, graciousness is our witness to our faith in the God who gives us the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that stands sentry watch over our hearts and minds.

Far from being naive, believers with **that** kind of peace in our hearts recognize evil and suffering and violence and discord for what they are, threats to the wholeness of God’s shalom for his people. Believers with **that** kind of peace in our hearts face life in all circumstances with the faith and assurance that the God who sent his Son as the Prince of Peace is with us and will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Our joy and peace grounded in our faith in that God, then, are our witness to a world that is so tragically not at peace.

Today’s worship service is not intended to be a 9/11 memorial service. However, since it is the 15th anniversary of that tragic day, we remember and honor the thousands of people who died, including rescue personnel, and we continue to pray for peace. The images on the screen are just as jarring this morning as they were on that clear, beautiful Tuesday morning in 2001. Our handbell choir offered a “Prayer for Peace,” not naively or cynically, but in the same spirit of the song “Let There Be Peace On Earth” and in the same spirit of the anthem’s composer who wrote, “What could I do to help? My hope is that this composition may be a prayer for an end to terrorism and for peace throughout the world.”

On July 26, my friend, Rev. Chris Denny, posted a prayer on his blog, “Almost Daily Prayer,” which I printed out and stuck in my sermon folder. I have been saving it for today’s sermon. It is titled “Called to be Peace.”

*I am not chicken little.
I do not believe “the sky is falling”
or that the world is coming
to an apocalyptic end — not yet.*

*But recently I was reminded
of a popular song
from my high school days:
“It’s the end of the world
as we know it . . .” sung by REM.
They went on to sing, “And I feel fine . . .”
But I don’t.*

*I feel scared, worried,
overwhelmed and uncertain.*

You ARE still in charge right?!? You do hear our cries for help?!?

*A conversation with a mentor reminded me
that there have been awful times before:
the awful bloodshed of brothers in the Civil War,
the extreme poverty of the great depression,
the death and violence of the Nazi gas chambers,
the world changing destruction of the atomic bombs dropped,
the assassination of presidents of the USA,
the assassination of civil rights pastors,
never mind the Roman occupying armies in Israel,
Lord, when you are walking on earth.*

*Through it all, you were weeping for your world,
calling for peace,
raising up leaders to embody peace . . .*

*I pray you are doing the same now.
But I am scared
that you are calling me
to be one of those leaders.*

*Help me,
together with your disciples,
your church,
to be your peace for the world.
United amidst our disagreements.
Arm in arm in our diversity.
Praying and working together for peace. Amen.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let us make our prayer for peace be made known to God.

And let peace begin with us.

Let us pray: Almighty, all-merciful God, through Christ Jesus you have taught us to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies. In times of violence and fear, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, so that we may not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good. Help us to see each person in light of the love and grace you have shown us in Christ. Put away the nightmares of terror and awaken us to the dawning of your new creation. Establish among us a future where peace reigns, justice is done with mercy, and all are reconciled. We ask these things in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹A *Witness to Peace: A Multi-Religious Gathering with Pope Francis* at www.popefrancisny-c.org.

²C. Michael Hawn, “*History of Hymns: ‘Let There Be Peace on Earth,’*” Discipleship Ministries: The United Methodist Church at www.umcdiscipleship.org.

³“Romans Prisons,” at www.unrv.com.

⁴Susan Eastman, “Commentary on Philippians 4:1-9,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁵Fred Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 72.