

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Every year just after midnight on New Year's Day, the leader of a large Christian denomination gives a speech. Among other things, he urges the people of the world to value human life, to stop hurting each other, and to resist the urge to go to war. Basically he is asking for peace on earth, the same thing so many of us long for.

How is it, then, that people can so quickly lose interest in peace as soon as someone shows any disrespect or seems to put them at a disadvantage? Don't people know that true peace requires personal sacrifice and letting others have an advantage? I recently heard one of our political leaders point out that the other side won't give an inch on anything. Sure enough, a political opponent then went on the air to make the same charge. You could probably name at least two people in our area who used to be friends, but now they won't talk to each other. And look at the divorce rate. How do we get from "I promise to love, honor, and cherish you until death parts us" to "Yeah, I'm not keeping my promise you"? Only one out of five married couples agree that they are both happy to be married to each other. That leaves 80% of marriages where one or both spouses are not happy. It gets more serious: barely a week goes by without someone in Minnesota being murdered. Where is the peace that the Prince of peace came to bring?

What about peace in the church? One third of the world claims to be Christian. Yet there are hundreds of separate

denominations. And I don't know of very many who are handling the differences between the church bodies very well. On the one hand, many church bodies, usually the smaller ones, are quite content to keep to themselves. They fire doctrinal volleys at each other from across denominational lines in order to make themselves feel like they are contending for the faith. And as long as their people remain convinced that all those other church bodies out there are bad, they feel safe in the cocoon of their comfort zone. Not very peaceful, is it? On the other hand, many of the larger church bodies are ignoring their doctrinal heritage in favor of unity based on nothing more than a desire for—you guessed it—world peace.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not in favor of strife. In fact, I have the same yearning for world peace as you. That marvelous song from the 70s is among my favorites: "I'd like to see the world for once all standing hand in hand, and hear them echo through the hills for peace throughout the land. That's the song I hear, let the world sing today, a song of peace that echoes on and never goes away." Then there's the song of the civil rights movement: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

So what's the deal? Why isn't there peace in the world, peace among the Christian churches on earth, and peace in all our homes? Could it be that Christmas has failed? Is the Bible wrong when it calls Jesus "the Prince of Peace"?

Even in our Gospel for today, the situation is unpeaceful. Some of the people who heard Jesus teaching at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem came to the conclusion: “*Surely this man is the Prophet.*” In order to understand what this group was asserting, it helps to know Deuteronomy 18:15. There Moses told Israel, “*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. Listen to him.*” In Jesus’ day people thought this Prophet would be someone other than the Messiah. So this part of the crowd thought Jesus was “the Prophet.” Others, however, were asserting, as if to say something different: “No, *He is the Christ.*” Still others contradicted this last assertion by asking, “*How can the Christ come from Galilee?*” See, they all knew Jesus was from Nazareth—definitely ‘from the wrong side of the tracks.’ So there you have it: three different opinions about Jesus. And he was right there to settle the disagreement! But was there peace? No, “*the people were divided because of Jesus.*” (No, there’s no other way to translate the original Greek.) What’s going on? THE PRINCE OF PEACE CAUSES DIVISIONS?

Yes, he does. He said so himself in Matthew 10:34-36. “*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother... a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.*”

So is Christ the Prince of Peace or not? How are we to resolve this tension, dear friends? It’s quite simple really. We start, as always, with the premise that God’s Word, the Bible, presents the truth. So when Micah (5:2-5) says in our Old Testament lesson for today that the coming Messiah will be the peace of everyone in his flock, we accept this as the truth. And when today’s Epistle lesson from Hebrews 2 points out that Jesus makes us holy, that Jesus calls us his brothers and his children, and that Jesus shared in our humanity and made atonement for our sins, we not only believe these things, we gain insight into how Jesus is our peace. The Christmas carol says it so well: “Peace on earth and mercy mild”—there it is! world peace!—not juicy justice, not harsh hatred, but “mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled”! The world peace Jesus brought is first of all peace between God and mankind.

Oh, how we need mercy mild. When we do the opposite of what God wants, we are saying to him, “I love this more than I love you, God. I love approval from my co-workers more than I love approval from you, Lord, so I’m going to tell this dirty joke and get them all to laugh—I like to be liked,” or “I’m going chortle about so-n-so’s faults and foibles because I want a shortcut to feeling good about myself instead of God’s way: confessing my sins and hearing that God loves me in Christ. I don’t really want God to be Lord and Master of my heart—not all the time.” That’s what we’re really saying when we do the opposite of what God wants.

Can you see this hostility, this lack of peace in us, from God's perspective? This scenario might help. You and a friend are the best of friends. You go out to lunch together every day. One day your friend doesn't come over to your table but sits down with someone else at another table. So you go over and say, "Aren't you coming over to our table?" Your friend responds, "Well, I'd like to eat lunch at this table with so-n-so." When your emotions post a dejected look on your face, your friend tries to spin things: "Well, it's not that I don't want to have lunch with you. I'm just going to have lunch with so-n-so. Nothing personal, okay?" But you still feel rejected. You don't know if you have fallen to second place, third place, fourth place.... But you know you're not number one. In fact it feels like your friend now hates you. That is a little of how God feels when we put him off with, "Can I come back around to obeying you later, God. I've got something else I really want to do now."

God is more than our friend. He is the almighty. He created us so we could be one with him. He has the right to expect total obedience from us. He says that disobedience is hatred toward him. Hatred brings war. War needs peace. Jesus is our peace. He has reconciled us to our heavenly Father by taking on himself the punishment for our sins. That's personal sacrifice. That's letting someone else have an advantage. So Jesus is the Prince of Peace, just like the Bible says.

The people in today's Gospel didn't need to be divided about Jesus. There doesn't need to be any division among the Christian churches on earth either. Peace often begins with an honest and humble examination of the facts. Remember what the third group of people in our text said? "Jesus can't be the Christ because he comes from Galilee. *Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem?*" If these people had simply asked, "Hey, Jesus, where were you born? And from whose family tree do you descend?" their argument for 'Jesus not being the Christ' would have crumbled.

And then they all would have become Jesus' disciples, right? It's idle speculation, but I don't think so. Unbelief by its very nature seeks to deny the truth. And that was the problem, dear friends. Because the people in our text didn't believe in Jesus, they couldn't come to the right conclusion about him. The same problem leads to divisions between denominations today: by nature we tend to deny or ignore those truths in the Bible that make us feel uncomfortable. And that's why the Prince of Peace could say he came to bring, not peace, but a sword. By nature people don't want to accept the truths of God just the way he lays them out in the Bible. Oh, and did I mention that all of us here are people?

But, wonder of wonders, the Holy Spirit, working through the Word and Baptism, does break through the walls of our unbelieving flesh, and does bring us to

peace with God. And if you want peace among people, you're going to like this next part: the peace that exists between God and believer could easily become peace between believer and believer. For example, let's say you and I have an argument. You could come to me and say, "Hey I wasn't very considerate of you when I said *such and such*. I'm sorry." And I could say, "I'm sorry that I didn't use loving words to respond. And now I'm also sorry I didn't come work this out with you sooner." And after being lovingly honest with each other about the wrongs committed, we could take the next step. We could say, "You know, our Lord doesn't hold any of our sins against us. Why don't we forgive each other?" "Yeah, let's put this behind us and never seek to get even." This works! You know it works if you've tried it.

A similar approach could be taken between the various denominations. It's more complicated, but the effort would start with a look at what the Scriptures actually say according to the universal rules of language. The Bible says what it says. So much of it is so clear that even people who don't agree with the Bible can attest to what it says—that's how they know they disagree with it. See? The Bible says what it says. Once everyone sees what it says, the only question left is, "Will I conform my thinking to what the Bible teaches?" In this way peace between God and us can become peace between churches.

Maintaining peace within a congregation takes some work. Let's not have peace just by not knowing each other very well. Let's move our ministry forward in this new year by working together. As we work together on projects around church or on reaching out with the good news of Jesus, we'll find plenty of opportunities to forgive each other, because church people are sinful people. But let's not let that stop us. Go ahead and speak up when you've wronged someone. Just own it. We practice doing this every Sunday with God. And then go ahead, approach your fellow believer humbly, gently, lovingly when you feel a wrong done to you or see a wrong done to someone else. Then we'll be demonstrating that we understand why Jesus came: first and most important, to remove sin, and second, to increase our love for each other. That's how peace spreads.

Dear friends, when the world and our families and even the church try to have world peace apart from how God treats us for Jesus' sake, a thin kind of peace can be achieved—until sinful friction brings conflict to the surface again. But in Christ, the Prince of Peace, there will be deep and godly peace among all who trust in Jesus as Savior and strive to do God's will. Let's be counted among them.