

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Psalm 34:12,14

DATE: 2019-10-20

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Peace

Series: Core Values

THEME: Jesus calls us to pursue peace with everyone

SERMON: "Pursuing Peace"

Introduction

A few months after arriving in the country of Somalia, Africa, David, a pastor, a teacher and a follower of Jesus was advised that a clergyman of another faith was preaching against him and he must be careful. David responded "If he has something against me, I must meet him and talk with him. Give me his name and I will go to meet him now. I have nothing to hide please arrange a meeting."

The meeting was arranged and the two clergymen met and had a lively but friendly conversation over a cup of tea and some cookies.

David heard later on that when this other clergyman heard someone speaking critically of David, that clergyman would say, "I have drunk tea in the home of David and his wife. We have talked about the deep things of God. I am confident that man is going to heaven."

This story reminds me of something Jesus said in [Matthew chapter 5:23-24](#)

²³ "So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

Today we are talking about another **core value** we have as followers of Jesus. We identify this one as **"Pursuing Peace,"** and state it this way:

"We value all human life and promote forgiveness, understanding, reconciliation,

and nonviolent resolution of conflict.”

Why is this approach to life and relationships so important to us? We believe pursuing peace is at the very heart of who Jesus is, and what he does.

The psalmist writes. **(34:12-14):**

**Does anyone want to live a life
that is long and prosperous?**

**¹³ Then keep your tongue from speaking evil
and your lips from telling lies!**

¹⁴ Turn away from evil and do good.

Search for peace, and work to maintain it.

The psalmist starts with a rhetorical question really. Who doesn't want to live a long prosperous life? Everyone wants that.

Peter reiterated the advice in his 1st letter. He is writing about how spouses should relate to each other, how all followers of Jesus should respond to aggression or hurt. He is writing about what we should do when we face suffering (that we should expect by the way, he says), suffering, just for being followers of Jesus.

1 Peter 3:9 Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you.

(remember Jesus taught that in his sermon on the mount – so he is reminding us of Jesus' teaching) **Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing.** (then he gives his reason)¹⁰ **For the Scriptures say,** (And Peter quotes the Psalmist)

“If you want to enjoy life

and see many happy days,

keep your tongue from speaking evil

and your lips from telling lies.

¹¹ Turn away from evil and do good.

Search for peace, and work to maintain it. (or “chase after peace)

And you notice this starts with how we use your tongues – our speech – our words, our tone of voice. If we could just learn to control our speech we would be making a good start to practicing this core value. How many fights have started then escalated because we use words that attack and tear down, rather than words that build up.

Our denomination’s official statement concerning this belief is stated this way:

Christ loved His enemies and He calls us as His disciples to love our enemies. We follow our Lord in being people of peace and reconciliation, called to suffer and not to fight. We reject all acts of violence which devalue human life. We affirm active peacemaking, sacrificial service to others, as well as the pursuit of justice for the poor and the oppressed in the name of Christ.

Many will read this core value and jump right into a discussion of whether Christ followers can participate in armed conflict between nations or people groups. While that is a worthy and important discussion to have, it is my personal conviction that the core value of pursuing peace must start much closer home.

I believe we have to begin the discussion by considering our approach to dealing with conflict and broken relationships in our homes, our church body, between congregations, with our neighbors, in the community, and with our own relatives. Peter says that judgement begins in the house of God. Jesus says take care of the log in your own eye before you concern yourself with the splinter in someone else’s eye.

In other words, if we believe pursuing peace is important, let it start in my own heart, and your own heart, with the people I have the closest contact with. As I begin to master the pursuit of peace personally, it will begin to shape and mold my thinking in broader arenas and I will be able to speak and act with integrity.

What is it about our understanding of following Jesus that makes pursuing peace so important?

From before his birth, to the time of his death, Jesus proclaimed Peace. The prophet Isaiah, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, and even the angels at his birth, proclaimed that Jesus and his kingdom would be characterized by peace rather than fighting.

John 18:36 Jesus (before Pilate) said, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world."

His proclamation of peace was continued by his followers after he returned to his Father. The letter writer to the Romans:

Romans 12:17-19

Never pay back evil with more evil. ¹⁸ Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God.

I Peter 2:22-23

For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

**²² He never sinned,
nor ever deceived anyone.**

**²³ He did not retaliate when he was insulted,
nor threaten revenge when he suffered.**

**He left his case in the hands of God,
who always judges fairly.**

We are called to respond in the same way towards people who are against us.

Paul writes to the Christ followers in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 This is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. ¹⁹ For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.

Notice, in the same way that God, through Jesus, pursued peace with each one of us by

forgiving us of our sins, God has called us to be a part of what He is doing in the world – pursuing peace. Our pursuit of peace is part of God’s plan He has called us to participate in.

Paul writes to the Christians as Colosse:

Colossians 1:19-22 For God in all his fullness

was pleased to live in Christ,

20 and through him God reconciled

everything to himself.

He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth

by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.

The possibility of peace is only because of what Jesus did on the cross. When he died, the way was made for us **1.** to have peace with God and **2.** for us to have peace with each other. This is the good news of the Gospel of Peace. Jesus was all about bringing peace and as his followers we must be all about bringing peace – in every relationship.

We believe that the message of peace is not just for some future time, but we are to live and proclaim now that peace is possible and desirable.

What kind of peace are we talking about? What do we mean by peace?

As youngsters, my brothers and sister and I would fairly frequently get into squabbles, alright they were fights. My mother would have to separate us – send one to one room and the other to another room, so we could not make faces or talk to each other for a while. On the outside it may have looked like peace – no visible conflict going on – but inside each of us was still brewing the plans of how to get back at each other as soon as mom let us out of our makeshift prison.

That is not the type of peace we are talking about.

For decades, countries of the western hemisphere were not in open conflict or war with some nations of the eastern block. It may have looked like peace but we all knew there was a conflict going on under the surface. In fact it was called the cold war.

That is not the peace we are talking about.

I have conducted wedding and funerals, where family members have attended, been civil to each other, offered the acceptable greetings, sometimes even smiled at each other as if everything was good between them – meanwhile a long standing feud was just under the surface.

Let's be real honest, have you ever come to church hoping that you won't run into a particular individual, or won't have to talk to them, because of an argument you may have had at a meeting or some other time?

Or you may even sit here in the auditorium and look across and see them, and your feelings are something other than, "I hope they are doing really well, what a nice person she is, or he is," have been in your heart? Everyone around you thinks you are getting along well – things look peaceful, but they are not.

That is not the type of peace we are talking about.

The peace we are talking about and want to pursue is expressed with a familiar Hebrew word: **Shalom**

This word is most often translated as "**Peace**" but it has a much broader meaning. Other English words that might help us are:

Harmony – you know how beautiful it sounds when a group of singers are all in harmony- and how unpleasant it is when one or more are off key.

The peace we are pursuing is harmony in our own hearts, and in our particular context, harmony between people and groups. In a harmony, not every note is the same, but all the notes enhance each other. Similarly, harmony in relationships does not imply that everyone agrees on everything. But neither do they emphasize the differences or disagreements. We pursue harmony between ourselves and others.

Other words that may help us understand what we are talking about:

Wholeness or **completeness** – nothing is missing. My grandfather and my uncle had a sever falling out when my uncle was 19 years old and he left home for 17 years. There was not fighting between them for those years – but every family get together, something was missing.

The family was not whole or complete. Shalom describes a scenario when everybody is there who can be there. No one is absent due to conflicts. And everyone feels welcomed and **included**. This is the peace we are called to pursue. It is difficult to imagine and some might object to this part of peace.

But in Matthew 5 Jesus taught that God sends the rain and the sunshine on both the good people and the bad people, and so one translation says “**there must be no bounds or limits to our love and goodness.**” Are you talking about people we don’t like or who don’t like us, and are antagonistic to us? Yes I am, and I believe Jesus is as well. Jesus invites us when we are antagonistic towards Him.

Pursuing peace then, is not just, “we aren’t fighting, we are in a state of truce, or we just ignore each other so we don’t get into arguments.” Pursuing peace as we understand it means that we are **actively seeking reconciliation between parties that do not get along**. We want people to be genuine friends with each other. We mean it includes everyone, not just the people we are most comfortable with. It even includes people before they are interested and willing. Pursue means we go seeking them, not just wait for them to come to us.

So **How** can we go about pursuing peace?

David Shenk, who has worked for many years among Muslims all over the world, pursuing peace, says it begins with **prayer**. His experience has been that “**prayer has the ability to transform hearts and thus to transform history.**”

He shares a story of when he was a young missionary he was called into the district commissioners office (that is the local law enforcement - like the state police) and was confronted publically with doing something against the law in his host country – he was inviting his students to faith in Christ. And a threat was made by the commissioner that there would be a “full investigation.” Implying that things would have to change. David was concerned about a public outcry against him and his work. He was afraid of a possible riot against him.

He said, “I prayed silently, “Holy Spirit, Jesus promised you will tell us what to say in such circumstances. So please hurry! There is no time to spare.”

David shared with the officer that he was grateful for the privilege to serve in the country and as a guest, wanted to obey the laws of the country. He then asked for the officer's advice on how he, David, should respond when students asked him to explain the source of David's joy and love – and their desire to learn of his Christian faith. And some would ask him how they could have that same faith. So David asked the officer, "What should I do?"

The officer replied, "No one can determine another person's faith for them. As for the students, continue just as you are doing. You are doing well. There will be no further investigation."

David believes his prayer was instrumental in bringing about the change of heart in the officer.

In our efforts to pursue peace and reconciliation, may we bathe each situation and conversation in prayer before, during and after. Let us not underestimate the power of Holy Spirit to change our own words and the heart of the person we seek peace with.

It is going to start with sincere and intense prayer.

In our statement of what it means to pursue peace, one of the most challenging phrases is the first one.

"We value all human life..."

The "all" is the challenge. Harriet Sider Bixler asks:

"Do we really mean all human life – the murderer on death row; the ruthless dictator who massacres his own citizens, the unborn baby conceived by a rape, the homeless alcoholic who won't accept help, the nasty coworker who is always criticizing? Surely there are limits."

She adds: **"But we have not left ourselves any escape clauses have we?"** Do we believe God loves everyone? I think the answer for most of us is a quick "well yes." But then if we are to be perfect in this as God is perfect and the concept of shalom includes everyone, then we have the difficult task of figuring out how we can pursue peace or reconciliation with everyone God brings into our sphere of influence.

What can we do to begin to learn to value all human life? May I suggest the words of

Paul to the church in Philippi: (by the way his opening prayer is that God would give them grace and peace) He says this in the context of urging two women in the church to settle their disagreement and restore peace.

Philippians 2:3-5

Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

³ Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

In essence Paul is saying, follow Jesus' example and value the other person as much as you value yourself and then be willing to humble yourself to point of serving, and even dying if necessary. Something Jesus did in his pursuit of peace with us. Once again, Jesus never calls us to something he has not done himself on our behalf. So it is **valuing** the other person.

In addition to genuinely valuing everyone, we believe we must also **promote forgiveness.**

Some of you may remember the recent news story of the sentencing of Amber Guyger for murdering **Botham Jean**. In the courtroom, Botham Jean's brother said, "I forgive you. I don't want you to rot in prison. I don't even want you to go to prison. I want you to find Jesus." And then he asked the court's permission to give his brother's killer a hug, as a way of showing that he meant what he said. Very moving and powerful. But this is how hard forgiveness can be, and it is necessary for the pursuit of peace.

This is the rubber meeting the road. And again it is following the path Jesus took. Jesus' life was premised on forgiveness. He willingly died on the cross so that we could be forgiven of our sins and become friends of God. He forgave those putting him to death. He taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness and offer forgiveness.

There is much to say and learn about forgiveness that we don't have time for this morning. But in it's simplest it is giving up **resentment** against someone or the **desire to punish** someone for hurting us. It is an act of the will, enabled by the power of Holy Spirit. It is choosing the **erase the account of hurt** that someone has committed against you.

As long as you and I hold a grudge, or resentment or bitterness, shalom is not possible.

We also need to **Gain Understanding** about the other person. This will help us develop sympathy or empathy, even tolerance and respect for the person with whom we are in conflict. It happens if we are genuinely curious about the other person. We must want to learn about the other person or people – their situation, their story, their journey.

When our children were younger, and they loved to play outside together, it was not unusual for one of them to come in stomping their feet, maybe slamming a door, and speaking angrily. If you are a parent, have you ever had that experience? What did you do? I hope didn't, or don't, just slap them, yell at them and tell them to go to their room for a week and get over it!!

No. don't you begin with, "Hey, what happened? What's going on? Why are you so angry?" You are trying to gain understanding about their situation. This is good parenting. You will then pursue peace between your children but it requires gaining an understanding of the situation. You will find yourself sympathizing with the child who is hurt even if you don't agree with their response and behavior.

This is not just good parenting. This is good relationship mending. It is a necessary part of pursuing peace. We are not talking about excusing or minimizing wrong, but rather trying to come to an understanding of the other person. We may also have to learn to tolerate differences and even allow others to have their way.

We believe we must also **Desire Reconciliation**. Sometimes we act as if we want the conflict to continue – so we can make the other person hurt or pay for a while. We want to get revenge, calling it justice. We have a saying: revenge is sweet. This is not a kingdom of Jesus saying. In his kingdom – forgiveness, even undeserved forgiveness is sweet. So we must

genuinely desire reconciliation, peace with everyone.

We are so glad that God desires reconciliation with us. He desires it enough that he did something about it. Jesus is calling for us to desire the same thing so that our lives reveal the character and love of God. Paul uses the example of the conflict that existed between Jews and Gentiles.

Ephesians 2:14-16 Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. ¹⁶ Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

We believe we are part of that one new people. And we believe everyone is invited to be part of that one new people – and hostility towards others is put to death. Not just in some future kingdom, but even now, it is our mission in the world – pursuing peace with all people, starting with the people closest to us.

It means holding a grudge, stirring up division and animosity towards others is not an option for us.

With whom do you need to desire reconciliation? With whom do you need to pursue peace? What can you do this week to embark on this exciting but scary journey with Jesus and Holy Spirit?

PRAY