

Isaiah 9:6-7 and Hebrews 12:12-15

“Pursue peace with everyone”

Happy Labor Day Weekend. I really didn't know much about this weekend or what we celebrate until I did a little bit of research into it. On September 5 1882 10,000 workers rallied and marched in NYC to protest a 7 day work week and working conditions that were brutal and inhumane. A dozen or so years later congress passed a law commemorating labor day as a day in which we celebrate the worker. This all came about as a result of a conflict, as a result of people organizing in order to change society for the better.

It is so interesting to me that so many of our national holidays are based around conflict. The 4th of July is our day of Independence when we declared ourselves free of the British, which inevitably led to war. MLK celebration is a day that we commemorate the birthday of the greatest civil rights activist in our time but who endured violence and persecution to the point of being gunned down for his love of people and God. Think of our national holidays and how they commemorate in some degree a non-peaceful situation that eventually led, we hope, to something more just and stable, and maybe even more peaceful.

But we don't have a national holiday on our calendars that is specifically marked for peace. A day when we mow the lawn of our cantankerous neighbor, can you imagine? Or the day that you bring a meal over to your sister in law who never really liked you. Or when you are called to reconcile your differences with that person who you aren't really sure how you ended up on opposite sides and it just doesn't make sense.

Scripture defines a mark of a Christian is one who leaves in their wake, peace, not destruction, certainly not conflict. Both of our Scriptures today lift up living in peace with others, pursuing peace with others as a goal after which we ought to strive and which we should be able to obtain. It isn't one of those goals that is always out of reach, like perfection. No, simply put, living in peace with others is doable, it is obtainable, and it is something that we, as disciples of Jesus, are called to embrace and live fully within that goal.

If you are someone who always seems to find conflict, listen to me, that is not normal. Some explain it away as being honest, it is just the way I am, I say it like I see it, I just say it as it is. No, that is an excuse for not wanting to change ourselves to reflect Christ more and us less. It is not the way of Christ to be in constant conflict, it isn't, no matter who you are. Today, we are going to be called to pursue peace as the primary way of Christ and as our primary way. Let's read.

READ

In our first Scripture today I hope you know that this Scripture is identifying what the Messiah will look like, and we have always used that Scripture around Christmas to identify Jesus as the one who came upon this earth and took on these characteristics because this is who he was, ultimately. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But wait, there is more, with his authority there should be endless peace. This is the fabric of who Jesus is. We often say that the example that Jesus sets for us allows us to live our lives in a way that is free and enables us to pursue that which is of God. Seeing Jesus humiliated on the cross is the supreme example of endurance when we are humiliated. Seeing Jesus vindicated in his resurrection allows us to recognize that when we demonstrate the necessary endurance we too will be lifted up with him. Jesus clearly shows us the way in all things, but especially in ways of peace.

For some of us, living peaceably with all is something that we have to learn how to do. It could also be that there is a correlation between how difficult our life is and the ease by which we come about to living peaceably with all. I haven't figured out yet if it is easier to live peaceably with all if you have had a difficult life. I think it is, because the easier your life the more you feel that you are owed by others, the more entitled we seem to be, so pursuing peace may not be high on your priority needs as you spend most of your time trying to meet your own needs irrespective of the needs of others.

Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites who find themselves in captivity, that even in that state of bondage, pursue peace. The author of Hebrews finds himself in the middle of the first century when Christians are being chased down and killed and being used for sport. Even in that state of persecution the author encourages peace as a mark of a Christian.

We began chapter 12 in Hebrews with a race, a marathon perhaps. Today we end that race with those who are probably in the back of the pack, they are still in the race, they are still running it, but they are near the end with their shoulders hunched over, their hands drooping, and their knees weak and hurting. We see that by the power of Christ weary, discouraged, and somewhat out of shape Christians are encouraged in these verses, first and foremost.

Remember, faith is the subject of this race. It is in faith that we are running this race and it is in faith that we can start and finish the race. But as we near the end we need to hear some encouragement to lift up your hands and to strengthen your knees. There was a time when Stacy

and were clicking off sections of the Appalachian Trail. We have slowed down some on that because of the distance to reach the trail for those sections which we haven't done yet. But I'll never forget one of the first sections that we ever did ended with a steep downward trail into Duncannon. My knees were hurting so much that I had to take a break every now and then and Stacy and I had a conversation that if every train on the Appalachian trail was like this, we simply could not do it. It was brutal, but then I stopped being a wimp and we ended up just fine.

There is encouragement in these verses to finish the race strong, there is encouragement in the beginning of these verses to persevere as we see elsewhere in Hebrews. But as you persevere, look at vs.13, the Greek says specifically, make sure the path that you are on leads to the final goal, that you don't veer off the path, but rather that what you are pursuing is Jesus.

This Scripture redefines what one of the primary marks of a Christian is who is pursuing Jesus. Within this race we are called to pursue peace as one of our primary characteristics or marks of being a Christian. Part of the endurance of faith is looking back like we saw a few weeks ago and ask the question, am I doing enough? Today, as part of our journey as a disciple we need to ask the question, have I pursue peace with everybody?

Some may object and say I wasn't wired for this, it is just the way I am, I say things the way I see them. That's an excuse to step outside of your primary identity as a disciple of Jesus. Look at vs.11 where we see that all the discipline Jen talked about last week was so that the fruit produced in our lives is the peaceful fruit of righteousness. God does not want any of us to be a magnet of conflict but rather a sower of peace. In our wake should be peace, and not conflict. We see that later in this Scripture as well as we read that those who do not pursue peace allow bitterness to spring up and as a result many become defiled. I have never seen that happen in churches where I have served, and if I see it trying to raise its ugly head I try to nip it in the bud. That is not who we are.

There are so many Scriptures that point us to the disciples of Jesus being marked by peace. Let's look at a few. Romans 12:18 – Live peaceably with all. We see in our own Savior that he was the one who brought peace. Look at the Gospel of John where that is repeated over and over again. John 14:27, Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you, and then he differentiates that from the peace that the world gives which is based on what we have as opposed to whom we have in our hearts which is Jesus. John 16:33 – I say this to you so that in me you may have

peace. The first words that Jesus says to his disciples when in John when he sees all of them in 20:19 – Peace be with you.

When we address peace within our own lives and within the Christian community, and in our homes, sometimes we exclude our homes as a place where peace needs to reign and I am here to tell you that it is probably one of the most important places where peace needs to reign. If your home is filled with conflict then that needs to change. Peace is an objective reality that results from the redemptive accomplishments of Christ in his sacrificial death on the cross. It is almost as if there is not peace in our lives then Jesus sacrifice is in vain.

The pursuit of peace has to be given practical expression and not just lip service. Peace binds the community together as an achievement of Christ, not our own achievement. The writer of Hebrews encourages us as we get to the end of the race, reminding us to fix our eyes upon Jesus and that the peace of Christ which passes all understanding is the norm for the follower.

We are about to take part together in communion which is the most powerful sign and symbol of the peace that Christ brings to this earth. In Matthew 5:24 Jesus commands us that if we are not at peace, if there is conflict with some within the community or within our life, we must reconcile. Make that a goal for your today, this week, find someone that you know you are not at peace with, that you know you not reconciled with. It can be someone in your family, but if there is someone in this church that you are not reconciled with start there, nothing is more important. Come to the table at peace. Amen.