# Peacemakers

Matthew 5.9; James 3:13-18

A sermon for Clairlea Park Presbyterian Church, Toronto by Pastor Kevin Livingston

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Friends, we’re working out way through the blessings or beatitudes that Jesus speaks at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. *“Blessed are the peacemakers,”* says Jesus, *“for they will be called children of God.”*

Here in this seventh blessing, Jesus makes a challenging statement about what every Christian is meant to be – we are called to be peacemakers with the people around us: in the church, with our families and neighbours, and in the world at large. And that’s what we’re going to reflect on today.

Some time after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said something strikingly different. It’s recorded in Matthew chapter 10, verse 34 where Jesus said: *“I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* Isn’t this a contradiction to his words here about being peacemakers? I don’t think so. I think what Jesus meant was that conflict would be the inevitable result of becoming his disciple, even in one’s own family, and that if we want to follow Christ, we have to love him deepest and put him first in our lives. And this first loyalty we render to Jesus means that all our other loyalties are relativized; they’re put in their proper perspective. It means we can never allow other people or other causes or other things in life to supercede or replace Jesus as the heart and centre of our existence. In that sense, then, giving our first loyalty to Christ can result in conflict with others who don’t share the same value system that we do. Conflict and opposition and struggle often comes with the territory of being a disciple of Christ.

It’s clear, however, that Jesus and the rest of the New Testament teaches that we should never seek out conflict or be responsible for it. On the contrary, we are called to peace. 1 Peter 3.11 says we are to *“seek peace and pursue it.”* Hebrews 12.14 exhorts us to make every effort to *“live in peace with all people.”* And Romans 12.18 reminds us that as far as it depends on us, we are *“to live at peace with everyone.”*

*“Blessed are the peacemakers,”* says Jesus, *“for they will be called children of God.”*

First of all, what does the Bible mean when it talks about peace? In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for peace is *eirene* (where we get the name Irene from, by the way). In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the word for peace is *shalom*. But this Hebrew word for peace that Jesus used means much more than just the absence of conflict. Peace isn’t that moment when the guns have been put away and the swords are put back in their sheaths. No, in Hebrew, peace always means everything that makes for a person’s highest good. It is wholeness and completeness and harmony of relationships. And even today, so I’m told, when a Jewish person greets someone else with the greeting of *shalom*, it doesn’t just mean that he is wishing for the other person an absence of evil things; it is a wish for them to have all the good things in life. In the Bible, says William Barclay, peace means “not only freedom from all trouble but the enjoyment of all that’s good.” And that’s the peace we’re meant to be pursuing on behalf of others here in this beatitude. Shalom. Wholeness. Abundance. Harmony. Peace.

Second, let’s note clearly what kind of person Jesus is praising in this beatitude. He is blessing peacemakers, not merely peace-lovers. Sometimes if we love peace in the wrong way, we’ll succeed not in making peace but in causing more trouble. For example, if we allow a threatening and dangerous situation to develop, and if we don’t take any action -- for the sake of harmony and keeping everybody happy – “keeping the peace” -- very often the situation will only get worse. It gets worse because we refuse to confront the situation and take the necessary action that the situation demands.

The peace that the Bible calls blessed does not come from evading the issues but from facing them, dealing with them, and conquering them. What Jesus is talking about here isn’t just the passive acceptance of things because we’re afraid of doing anything about them. No, to be peacemakers means that we’re to be proactive, actively facing and confronting those persons and situations where there’s conflict and hostility. And to make peace in these circumstances can be very hard but necessary work.

Think, for example, of a woman who doesn’t confront her husband’s abusive behaviour towards their children, and so the children grow up lacking in self-esteem and assurance of their parents’ love. It could have been confronted, but for the sake of “peace,” she didn’t care enough to confront this evil behaviour. And the kids ended up paying the price. Peacemaking is hard but necessary work.

The third thing to say about this peacemaking activity is that it is grounded in the character of God, and our peacemaking is a reflection of the peace God has won for us through the death of Jesus on the cross. Peacemaking is a divine work, because peace means reconciliation, and God is the author of both. Real peace and authentic forgiveness are costly treasures that spring from the heart of God, and we are called to follow the example of our Lord, who is peacemaker *par excellence.*

It’s interesting that this very same Greek verb that is used in the beatitude to describe our job as peacemakers is the verb that Paul uses to describe what God has done through Christ. As Paul puts it in Colossians 1.20, it was through Christ that God was pleased *“to reconcile to himself all things… making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”* Or again as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2.15, Christ’s purpose was to *“create in himself one new humanity in place of the two [Jew and Gentile] thus making peace…”*

So Christ is both the Author and the Giver of the peace we have with God, and he’s the highest example or model of the peace we are meant to pursue with others.

What does all this emphasis on peacemaking mean, then, in practice for our lives? It means that even if we are not personally involved in a dispute, we may find ourselves struggling to reconcile or make peace between two people or two groups who are estranged and divided from one another. It’s part of our mandate as Christians. And when we do find ourselves in this situation, it will involve the pain of listening to all sides of the dispute; and of ridding ourselves of prejudice, as best we are able to; of striving sympathetically to understand both opposing points of view; and of risking misunderstanding, a lack of gratitude, or even failure.

David Bosch has written: *"If we are followers of the One who was crucified we too will have to be cross-bearers."* That’s what it ultimately means for us to be peacemakers. Reconciliation occurs when two opposing forces come into conflict, and someone gets crushed in between. This is precisely what happened to Jesus on the cross when he reconciled Jews and Gentiles to God and to one another, making them into one new humanity (Eph. 2:14-17).Yet Jesus not only died an atoning death that offers us peace with God. In a real sense, his entire life and ministry was a reconciling, peace-making action. In his life as well as his death, Jesus was a peacemaker.

Let me cite David Bosch again:

Look at this man as he walks the dusty roads of Palestine and ministers to the crowds! He could also -- as we often do -- present argument upon argument to show that the people have only themselves to blame, that the Jews only got what they deserved or that the Romans were wicked and cruel. Jesus does not adopt this line, however. He disarms himself. He stands with a bleeding heart before Jew and Roman, black and white. He invites all of them in, even if it might mean that they would exploit him, trample upon him and deceive him. He accepts all of them unconditionally.

He is the Good Samaritan who risks his life for a Jew who is really supposed to be his archenemy. He is the good Shepherd who puts his own life in jeopardy for every obstinate sheep. He is the Servant who washes the feet even of a traitor. He is the Master who loves the rich young ruler while knowing that the young man would not be prepared to pay the price of discipleship. He is the one who reinstates Peter in his office, even if Peter has denied him in the hour of trial. He is the Master who trusts his disciples sufficiently to send them to the ends of the earth, even while knowing that they have all deserted him and fled in the hour of trial. Ultimately, Jesus is the One who prays for those who crucify him: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* [Bosch, “Processes of Reconciliation, 164-165].

And this sacrificial lifestyle and reconciling death of Jesus provides a costly path for those of us who would follow him as peacemakers.

Indeed, by definition, to be his follower means that one way or another, in our work as peace-makers, we ourselves may get hurt in the process. But could it be any other way? Unless we are willing to get hurt in the peace-making process, we can’t help others who hurt.

God, in Christ, has made peace by the blood of the cross. And based on that peace-making event that reconciles us to God, God in turn calls his children to be instruments of his peace to others.

One of the indelible images in my mind when I was young from the Vietnam War is the famous and horrific photograph of a nine-year-old girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc. During a battle between North and South Vietnamese troops, an American commander ordered South Vietnamese aircraft to drop napalm bombs on her tiny village. Two of her brothers were killed, and she was burned badly. Wearing no clothes, she fled up the road towards the cameraman. Because of the pain her arms are held out sideways and her mouth is open in a cry of agony. Do you remember that photograph?

According to Elaine Scallion in the *New York Times,* Ms. Kim Phuc suffered third-degree burns over 50% of her body, but she lived. She endured fourteen months of painful rehabilitation and scores of skin grafts. “It was so painful to have her wounds washed and dressed that she lost consciousness whenever she was touched.”

Since then she has married, emigrated to Canada, and become a Christian who writes and speaks about her life experiences. Her burned skin lost sweat and oil glands, and she is still in much pain. Scars stretch up her arms to her chest and back. But despite her past and present suffering, in 1996 she accepted an invitation from several Vietnam veterans groups to join in Veterans Day ceremonies held at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where she laid a wreath and spoke words of forgiveness. “I have suffered a lot from physical and emotional pain,” she told the audience of several thousand people, who greeted her with two standing ovations.

Sometimes I could not breathe. But God gave saved my life and gave me faith and hope. Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him, ‘We cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future and to promote peace.’

Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope, and forgiveness. If that little girl in the picture can do it, ask yourself: Can you?” [“Phan Thi Kim Phuc,” Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phan_Thi_Kim_Phuc#cite_note-22> ]

Those who suffer the most can be the greatest peacemakers.

When we do that, when we live out this beatitude to be a peacemaker in our relationships, in our families, in our church, in our community, in our world, what is the result? Jesus says that those who are peace-makers *will be called children of God.* Those who are peacemakers will be called God’s sons and daughters…. But what does that mean?

*It means that p*eacemaking is a godly work. And when it says that peacemakers *shall be called sons and daughters of God,* the point that is being made is that since we are doing the work of God, we reflect the image of God. When someone says to a son or daughter, "I can see your father in you," they are talking about an inherited image. The same is true for us Christians. We inherit the image of our heavenly Father the more we act like him.

It’s unclear from the text whether we will be called **sons and daughters of God** by other people or by God himself. Perhaps it is both. People, seeing our God-like work in peacemaking, call us children of our Father. And God calls us His children as well. That’s the reward for being a peacemaker.

Are you a peacemaker? Do you seek to point people to the Prince of Peace, and help them be reconciled to him and to one another? May God empower us to be his agents of peace, today and always. Amen.