

WHY WE GATHER
Growing a Community Devoted to God, Neighbor, and One Another

“Peace Makers”
(Matthew 5:9)

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October 23, 2016

Introduction

1. The first section of our teaching series “Why We Gather” is coming to a conclusion next week. This eight-part section has worked on the idea that we gather as those who follow Christ to grow a community of people who are devoted to God, neighbor, and one another. The process of growing authentic community is not like working our way through a pre-defined check list of simple tasks. Rather, it is more about cultivating the soil of our shared life together through framing our knowledge and experience of God. And, by clarifying the culture and the values of our community such that as ourselves and new and more people plant themselves here, we are fed by the nutrients in the soil in order to grow both in depth and in height.

We have leveraged the famous eight Beatitudes of Jesus to guide us through this first section. The beatitudes are a perfect match for working the soil of a Christian community because the beatitudes are not simple formulas for success or happiness, but rather a way to see the world such that happiness finds us even in the difficulties of life.

2. We only have two beatitudes to go. To this point we have learned to embrace mystery and humility, identify with the suffering of others, boldly seek meekness, hunger and thirst for right relationships over self-righteous answers, see purity of heart not as perfection but a process of bringing our losses and whole selves into the same clear view that our creator has of ourselves...

And, today, we arrive at peace making where Jesus said:

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:9. NIV

3. Given the current United States election cycle, this is a very timely topic. It's an impossible topic, but timely one none-the-less! What is it about us humans that compels us to devour one another in political election cycles? And, if we think that this election is worse than all others we only need to return to the election of 1800 to think otherwise. Political parties worked a little differently back then where a sitting vice president could run against a sitting president.

That is what happened with Vice President Thomas Jefferson's campaign accusing then sitting President John Adams of having a "hideous hermaphroditical character..." In return, Adams' called Vice President Jefferson "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed..." and such offensive racial slurs I'm not going to repeat them here. Over the election cycle Adams was

labeled a fool, a hypocrite, a criminal, and a tyrant, while Jefferson was branded a weakling, an atheist, a libertine, and a coward.¹

If you think about it, the rhetoric of the Presidential election of 1800 makes the political insults of today seem almost tame by comparison. Given these seasons of reoccurring rancor in the political landscape and what can happen any day of the week by just showing up in American society—peace making is treacherous work.

4. Yet, Jesus said the Creator of all things will own us and name us as God's children (like a parent bragging about their child at a band concert, spelling bee or sporting event... "that's my daughter... that's my son... I'm so proud") when we make peace in our relationships and between others in our society. As with the other beatitudes, this is a provocative and difficult teaching. And, in light of the peace making ethics of Jesus it challenges us to see peacemaking as the non-violent path through conflict that comes with great risks and even greater rewards.

Given that Jesus called peacemakers the children of God, I need to take a step back from the beatitude for a few minutes and ground the work of peace making in the very being and nature of God.

A. God as Peace Maker

1. God is the first and best peace maker. That fact is not always obvious when we read our Bibles cover to cover, and even in daily devotions, because of the Bible's complexity and varied interpretations. For instance, the Hebrew texts of our Bible contain in some places vivid descriptions of God instructing various theocratic leaders to commit genocide and in other places theologically loaded directives that discourage peace and strongly promote violence. In some cases the only logic present is "they are not like us and therefore are the enemy."

For those who read and interpret the Bible without considering the struggles of Judeo-Christian interpretive history and a hierarchy of truth in Scripture, it is easy to read such passages of Scripture, cut out vast amounts of other Scripture, and cast God as a retributive and wrathful deity. For those who discern Jesus as the epicenter of truth in Scripture and are willing to be honest about the distance between some voices in the Bible and the voice of Jesus, seeing God as the first and best peace maker is as easy as seeing the sun on a cloudless day.

And, once you have awakened to a clear view of God as the original peacemaker you can't un-see God as the ultimate peace maker. It's like buying a car and then seeing that car everywhere on the road. Seeing God as peace maker changes how we see the world and necessarily reframes the wrathful language and violent actions of people committing their acts of violence in the name of God in biblical history, and all of human history for that matter, as little more than *projecting* their personal fears in some cases and thirst for violence in others, on the God of compassion, faith, hope and love most expressly embodied in Jesus.

I realize that is a lot to take in. So, let me explain a little further.

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/08/22/mf.campaign.slurs.slogans/> (accessed 10-22-16)

2. The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote in the first chapter of their letter to the Early Church:

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

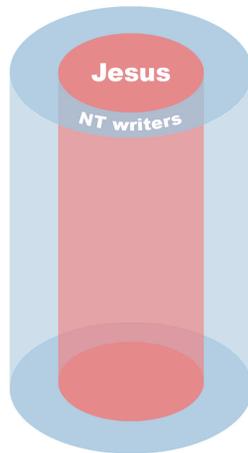
Hebrews 1:1-3. NIV

3. The gospel biographers recount Jesus making this exact point many times over, and the writer of Hebrews is emphatic here as well—in the Christian worldview it is Jesus that all of Scripture points to and it is Jesus who the most important voice in the room when we read the Bible. Sadly, some Christians are taught with little nuance that the Bible, cover to cover, is all equal truth. That's just not being honest to what is actually in the Bible. And, based upon what Jesus said about himself and the first followers said about Jesus-- Jesus gets priority in what the Bible says and means to us. He has the first interpretive lens.
4. I have created a visual illustration that describes the concept of hierarchy and truth in the Bible. First, Jesus is the center of truth. ²



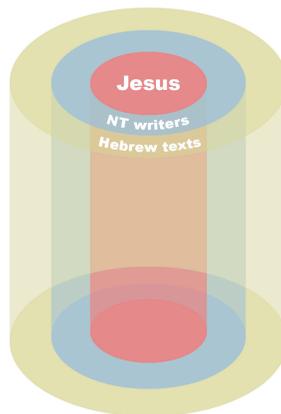
Everything that Jesus said and did is center point and what matters most for Christ followers. Next, the first disciples and early church leaders, such as the writer of Hebrews, looked at Jesus, studied his teachings and came to conclusions about how Jesus' teachings, ethics and theology should be applied to a wide array of topics beyond even what Jesus addressed.

² John 14:6.



This is where the Bible becomes more complicated because the New Testament writers came from specific educational, cultural and religious traditions that existed before Jesus. In their application of Jesus' truths to specific cultural, ethical and moral situations, it is clear that they struggle to sort out many matters of conflict in the Early Church while they work on the origins of Christian theology.

Moving concentrically to another layer of complexity: Christianity considers the Hebrew Scriptures before Jesus as an essential part of the whole of the Bible.



The Hebrew and Aramaic texts include volumes of narrative history, poetry, wisdom and apocalyptic literature, as well as holiness codes and Jewish cultural and theological traditions weaving in and through all of the books from Genesis to Malachi. Jesus interacted with the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, but in a way that often transformed their meaning.

5. I cannot say this with enough emphasis: We are given the gift of the whole Bible as written revelation to teach us the ways of God, but the ways of God are discerned from the synthesis of God's first Bible, the Creation and how things can be discerned through reason, God's self-revelation in Jesus as our center point, God's biblical revelation over a 6,000-year period of time as captured in Scripture, and as well, 2,000 years (and counting) of the Christian church wrestling with our religious traditions.

In these convergences and the search for truth we should avoid unnecessary dualisms between Jesus and the other voices in Scripture, but ultimately realize that not all parts of written Scripture

are of equal weight and we need to look to Jesus as the epicenter of God's revelation. After all, we call ourselves Christ-i-ans above "Paul-i-ans" or "Abraham-i-ans", or any of biblical characters whose stories frame our knowledge of God. And Christ-i-ans above Catholic, Coptic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant-i-ans as well!

6. That is a whole lot of background to support the point of God being the first peace maker not the first war monger. I share it because if we do not understand the peaceful nature of God and how God makes peace with us in Christ, we will not fully understand the ways we are to make peace with others. For instance, the musicians read this teaching of Jesus earlier in the service...:

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38-48. NIV

...that says if you do all of these peace making things, you will be the children of God. Gospel biographer Matthew placed this teaching only a few verses after the beatitudes as one of many stopping points throughout chapters 5-7 in which we are given specific applications of the beatitudes in everyday life. Most agree that Matthew 5:38-47 are some of the most demanding expectations in all of the teachings of Jesus. They are demanding because we almost have to become God like to overcome our fears, anger and personal histories to actually overlook an insult, give money without measuring, love our enemies for real and pray for those who persecute us.

7. To Jesus, that is how God makes peace, even with God's enemies. And, thus the way we are to be peace makers in our world as well if we are to be the children of God as Jesus taught. "But, I have read in the Bible and it tells me to defend my faith at all costs, set myself apart from any non-Christians, point out to the world that the wrath of God is against people, and along the way realize that any suffering I encounter is God teaching me a lesson"...you might say in response and in confusion about Matthew 5:38-47.

To what I already said--we can find some passages of Scripture to support wrathful, retributive, and merciless theologies of God. And, we can also open our eyes to scores upon scores of passages that better align with the teachings of Jesus, our *center point*.

8. And, to this point I need to go even a little further into biblical interpretation and Christian theology to make a critically important point in the work of peace making. One of the reasons why the Christian Church has been pegged in American and Western Culture to be unkind, judgmental,

condemning, and so unlike Jesus is because of the roots of the Protestant Church's understanding of a key theological concept linked to the love and grace of Jesus Christ and how God makes peace with us: Atonement.

We all face the question "how can sinful people ever be accepted by a holy God?" Atonement through Jesus is the answer to that question. But, as you might guess, there are many different theories of atonement that seek to interpret the means with which the life, death, and resurrection of Christ atoned for the sins of humanity. And, the crux of the matter resides in the question: "why did God in Christ have to atone for our sins and make peace with us in the first place?" Even more pressing, "did the death and resurrection of Jesus somehow change God's mind about us?"

Sit with me for a few minutes in this, because every one of these theories can be backed up with supporting Scripture texts.

9. One atonement theory in the Protestant tradition is a "power over" theory. It states that humanity is held in bondage to sin, death, and the devil, with Jesus, in his atonement, liberates us by defeating all the *powers* that enslave us. The weakness in this approach is that sin is perceived more as a broad power over us, rather than as personal wrestling coming from within each of us.

A second atonement view is rooted in juridical or legal language. Medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury understood sin to be an affront to God so serious that the sinful human race must offer reparations to God. Reformed Theologians like John Calvin pushed this emphasis to an even greater extreme...to the point that God is more than offended, he is *angry* and stands wrathfully against our sin and demands that the sinner is punished. Thus, Christ's work of atonement on the cross was to appease the wrath of God that stands against people and their sin. The weakness in this interpretation of scripture is that the starting point of our relationship with God is completely adversarial.

10. The view of atonement of the Covenant denomination is arguably more Christ-centric in its theological framing, and is best summed up by the writings of theologian Paul Petter Waldenström who was echoing writings of others in Christian history including a pre-protestant theologian-philosopher from the High Middle Ages named Duns Scotus. Waldenström's five points of atonement theory state that Jesus didn't change God's mind about us; rather, Jesus changed our minds about God. God did not need Jesus to die on the cross to decide to love humanity. God's love was infinite from the first moment of creation; the cross was Love's dramatic portrayal in space and time.³

³ The contribution of P.P. Waldenström to the dialogue surrounding the significance of the cross can be summed up in the following five points: 1) That through man's fall no change occurred in the heart of God. 2) That therefore, it was neither cruelty nor wrath in the mind of God which, as the result of the fall, was obstructing man's salvation. 3) That the change which occurred in the fall was a change in man alone in that he became sinful and thereby fell away from God and the life which is in him. 4) That, as a result, an atonement was needed for man's blessedness, but not an atonement which appeased God and rendered him, once more gracious, by (an atonement which took away man's sin and rendered him righteous. 5) This atonement took place in Jesus Christ. (Karl A. Olsson, *A Family of Faith* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1975), p 20f.)

Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308) built his argument on the pre-existent Cosmic Christ described in Colossians and Ephesians. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) who came forward in a moment of time so we could look upon "the One we had pierced" (John 19:37) and see God's unconditional love for us, in spite of our failings.

Waldenström wrote:

“Atonement has its origin in God’s love. All of God witnesses to this love but only in Jesus is its essential nature fully disclosed. There it is seen to be unconditional: ‘it does not love for any other reason that it is love’. Like an artesian well it constantly flows out, completely unearned and undeserved. It is not primarily a matter of emotion but is a movement of God’s being toward those in need. Love moves God to stand at the side of sinners and to identify with them at whatever cost.⁴

As you might imagine, Waldenström’s theology pushed against the headwinds of Reformed Theology in the late 19th and early 20th century, and was considered controversial in some circles. Much less so today. I have a great appreciation for his atonement theory because it promotes a theology of peace making grounded in the inexhaustible love of God and not some illusory meritocracy.

11. Western Protestant Christian religion has lived under the Reformed teaching of wrath for so long it doesn’t even recognize its own vitriol. We need to hear again the words of the Apostle Paul: “don’t show contempt for the riches of God’s kindness, tolerance, and patience by not realizing that God’s *kindness* leads you toward repentance.”⁵ Kindness and forbearance is the ground in which peace is made between God and people, and the ground in which we make peace with one another, a work comes with great risk and even greater reward.

B. Christ Followers as Peace Makers

1. In Matthew Chapter 10 Jesus sent his disciples out into the countryside to spread his teaching and ministry of compassion. You could say that he sent them on their first peace making mission! His instructions were to go to the people of their own religious tradition and begin there, because they would likely have some commonality and good starting points. He encouraged them to do great and helpful stuff: heal the sick, touch the untouchables, be bold against evil and generous to those in need. And, to teach what Jesus taught.

In the midst of his instructions Jesus also gave his followers some unusually strong warnings such as, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves so be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” “Because of what you teach brother will betray brother and children will rebel against parents....you will be hated because of me.”

2. Not this is not my idea of a pep speech for a peace mission. And, there were more troublesome warnings because Jesus went on to say:

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

⁴ Covenant Affirmations: This we Believe, by Donald Frisk. Page 101.

⁵ Romans 2:4.

³⁷ “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10:34-39. NIV

3. On one level this seems completely counter flow to Matthew chapter 5 and Jesus’ work of peace making. In fact, some Christians use this passage of Scripture as a basis for aggressive and coercive religious proselytizing and then write off the inevitable trail of destroyed relationships as simply collateral damage. That line of thinking is completely inverted to what Jesus’s point here is in specific and to the Gospel of Jesus in general.

As with all of the paradoxes of Jesus, we have to sit and hold them in the tension long enough for the deeper reality to emerge. In this paradox (be peacemakers/I didn’t come to bring peace), the deeper reality about being peace makers is that Jesus’ message of radical and generous grace through faith, loving enemy, and measureless generosity can cause a world of trouble and even broken relationships. Its just too generous for standard human tribal thinking. And, if you want current examples, look no further than the human sexuality identity conflict where incredibly beautiful Christian gay couples are being dis-owned by their parents and relatives and inclusive churches have become enemies in their own family of churches.

Sure, high pressure decision theology can break relationships too, but that is for all the wrong reasons! It is grace that scandalizes people and breaks families, and sadly, it is most often religious people that do the breaking. But, for those who hang in there and keep pouring out measureless love, and seek peace in the midst of violence, beautiful and amazing stories can be attributed to the children of God who have the courage to neither fight, nor flee conflict, but rather sit in the mess and like Jesus, look for God’s redemptive narratives to emerge.

4. I heard one such peace making story this last Wednesday at a pastor’s gathering that had an impact on me. I was at a pastor’s gathering in which one of the pastors talked about how they briefly made reference to the complex matter of white privilege in their sermon and one of the members of his dominantly white congregation sent him a blasting email and requested a meeting. The pastor was to have the meeting that night and the rest of the pastors at the table were offering this and that suggestion as advice, but it was one pastor who offered the most compelling peace making advice: “rather than try to argue data could you try telling a story?”

The story he told us was recent and it is about a black family in which one of the children was finding peace in their journey of reconciliation with white people and in the Christian faith. But, this young woman was sad because her black father was hurt and hardened by the perfect storm of being both black and a Muslim in America. He just didn’t have any soul space for white people and this became an increasing point of conflict with his daughter and a source of hopelessness. That is, until a white family in the neighborhood became separated from their young daughter and the daughter, unfamiliar and lost, approached the black Muslim father and grabbed his leg and said “please help me mister, I don’t know where my parents are.”

He took the little girl and found her parents a few blocks away. And, when re-united the little girl first bounced to her parents, and then back to the black Muslim father grabbing his leg again and

this time saying “I love you.” In reflection, this single moment created a new opening in the man’s heart because of the sacred moment of seeing and needing one another across racial and religious boundaries.

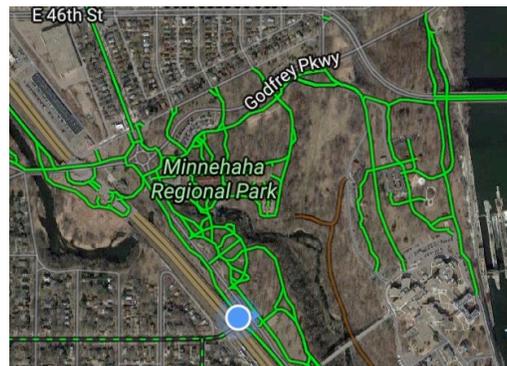
Tell stories. That was the peace making advice of one pastor to another as they were preparing for a contentious meeting. And, the advice for us is that peacemaking happens best when we are in proximity with one another and when we use our stories.

Conclusion

1. I admit—peace making is some of the most difficult and complicated work a Christian can do. The worst of circumstances is when we find ourselves sandwiched between our thoughts, the teachings of Jesus, our specific Christian religious tradition, our families and loved ones, and issues in broader society. In such complexity and uncomfortable space our methods of peace makings can make all of the difference. But, you may be here today and not feel that you are equipped with the right stories. And, you may find nuanced biblical interpretation and theories of atonement very interesting, but your thoughts go to what might happen in a few weeks at the Thanksgiving dinner table, or next week at the neighborhood town hall meeting.

I have a concluding thought to leave us with as we wrap up. The following image....

[ONSCREEN]



...is a google map image that I pulled up when I was trying to commute home on my bike from the West River Bank and got completely confused at Minnehaha Falls. My location is the GPS marked blue dot and the green lines are the tangle of optional bike trails. It looked like a confusing mess to me in the moment, where I was out of breath and frustrated that I was heading south when I wanted to be heading west. It took a minute for me to calm down, center, realize that it was a beautiful fall day, and that if any one of these paths lead “northish” and would get me to the west bound trail where I needed to go. I simply needed to keep my compass bearings and head in a general direction even if there was no perfect path through.

2. Similarly, our challenge in peacemaking is to see Christ as our compass and allow the path toward peace to emerge amidst tangled relational messes and even intractable conflict. If we can center and stay at it, the chances get better that things will work out. Sometimes things do not

work out. But, choosing the alternative of giving up will give us the same results as the small town of Seneca, Nebraska that covers only one-eighth of a mile and had a population of 33.⁶

The town's people couldn't agree on animal ordinances and who should be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the town. And, because no one stepped in to be the peace maker, and they didn't reach out for help to work out their disagreements, things got so bad that people on both sides called one other names like "drug addicts, drug dealers, welfare queen, creep, jerk," and names much worse than the presidential elections of 1800 and 2016. Half of Seneca finally gave up on the prospect of a peaceful solution and successfully gathered a petition leading to an official vote to un-incorporate, which passed 17-16.

What was most clear in the news reports was that they stopped remembering and telling one another's stories. It didn't matter that their political process had broken down because they lost the value of one another, stopped seeing one another, and then while vilifying one another literally broke the community for good.

3. Christ followers called children of God are invited to walk a different and courageous path, even in our presidential election cycles. We are invited to be peacemakers living out the DNA of the original peace maker, and rise above the fray and confusion and reclaim and tell and re-tell our stories that bring more and increasing paths of peace even if they are imperfect, bumpy, and sometimes downright unbearable journeys to walk.

Prayer

God of peace teach us how to be your children. Holy Spirit give us the healing words to speak that bridge the gap in broken places, and help us to hold back words that would makes peace more elusive. Jesus, mentor us in the art of peace making. God, three in one, be our peace and lead us in the way of peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week begins may we remember the words of the Apostle Paul when he wrote:⁷

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."

Go in peace. Amen.

⁶ http://www.omaha.com/columnists/hansen/hansen-how-tiny-seneca-nebraska-torn-apart-by-bitterness-voted/article_feb222a2-9255-5c90-90c6-0eb61d141e00.html (accessed 10-22-16)

⁷ Colossians 3:15