

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Live Peaceably With All”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.” ’ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”’: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, I ask that You bless the words that I share this morning, the words from the Old Testament that Karen has shared, these words from Paul. Ask that you and your spirit would minister through the words, that the word of Christ would speak providing us comfort and strength, resilience and hope, and an invitation to recognize the challenges that this life, especially now as we're separated, brings as we all strive to be faithful. I ask all this and ask for your blessing in Christ's name. Amen.

It's somewhat humorous to me that the reading for today is Romans 12:9-18. When I got back from Chicago, I sat down in my study at home and created a curriculum that I was going to use at our staff meetings called Cultivating Peace, Let the Scriptures Be our Guide. And it was going to be-- or it is a study of Romans 9-18. But instead of reading it in the order that it appears in Scripture, I flipped the order beginning the study at the 18th verse and then moving to the 17th, the 16th, etc., and ending at the 9th verse. Bill was out on vacation, and I was having a conversation with our Presbytery Leader, Craig Howard, about beginning the study. And he encouraged me to wait since Bill was out, and he mentioned that there were some other things he'd like to talk to me about. And so I laid it aside. And again, I just find it sort of spiritually ironic that here we are with this text before us in the lectionary today. The reason that I created this study for the staff to work through was a growing recognition of the stress of the last four and a half years. I recognize in myself a diminishing presence, a much shorter fuse, an attitude at times of being flustered, frustrated, and, to be quite honest, simply not caring enough to deal with some of the private issues of ministry, the issues that are not seen by all of you but that are seen up in the office week in and week out. I realize that, for myself, I had very little resilience. My tank, if you will, was quite empty, and it was hard for me to stay calm and to be present in the midst of all the things that we need to do as a staff to make church vibrant and joyful for all. I also recognize the stress that the staff has been enduring during this four and a half years in a seemingly unending cycle of my being out for a surgery, being in recovery for a couple weeks to to several months. And this has happened five times in the last four and a half years for surgery. Plus, in July, I was gone again for an entire month in the pain management program in Chicago. And then I come back, looking forward to reintegrating back into the staff. but this is now the sixth time in four-and-a-half years that I've been out and away. And to be honest, the last four and a half years have been really stressful for all of us. So, again, in recognition of this stress, I felt a need to begin working through what my yo-yo-ing presence plus a diminished ability to stay calm, present, and caring-- how that's been impacting the staff, and what we needed to kind of begin to talk about and work about. I recognized that and created this curriculum. Again, Romans. Based on Romans 12: 18 through 9. And I titled the curriculum: Cultivating peace. Let scripture be our guide.

In a sense, in this passage, when you look at it backwards and probably even when you look at it forwards, Paul lays out a road map for how Christians are to live peaceably in the world in which they inhabit. And when we read it in scripture, by ourselves, in our devotional time or in a time of prayer or contemplation, it seems so obvious and so simple. But are you-- being quite honest with you today when I acknowledged that it is sometimes not simple at all but quite hard to do. It's not easy to embody the passage that Paul has written to the Romans.

And so, I'd like to read that passage backwards, beginning at verse 18. Paul says, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be hardy. Associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Contribute to the needs of the Saints. Extend hospitality to strangers. Rejoice and hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Do not lag in zeal Be ardent in the spirit. Serve the Lord. Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." This is the map that Paul has laid out for us on how it is that we are to live peaceably among others. And when we read it, or even hear it read in a sermon, it just seems so obvious and simple. We, as Christians, embody what Paul says and we go about our way being faithful in all we do. But there are times in our lives when it's not easy at all. Because we find ourselves in a situation that is unexpected, or we find ourselves worn down by what's been happening within us or around us. Or, as is evident in this political climate that we find ourselves in, the world is simply

at odds, one camp against another and the cost of that I would say is Paul's way for peace. In fact, I kind of took what Paul wrote and imagined a response to that. I call it a manifesto of self-righteousness or life in today's world. And I don't mean self-righteousness in that hardy kind of religious way we so often think about it. I mean self-righteousness in its most basic definition that I'm right, you're wrong. Again, as the political climate seems to have embodied for us. This sense I think has nothing to do with peace and it has everything to do with protecting our own sense of how right we are in our camp and how wrong those other people are in that other camp. So, here is this manifesto of being right or self-righteousness in our life in today's world.

Living in peace with others is impossible. Don't even try. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Protect yourself. You know what is right. Stop looking at those who are hurting. Ignore their pain. Just do what you know is right to do. Despise those who rejoice because they're in the other camp. Turn away from those who weep because they're weak and have no place in your camp. Bless only when it is easy. Erect a wall of knowing that you are right. Protect your assets. Focus on what you need not others. Be skeptical. Enough is enough. Listen to your heart rather than the heart of God. Give up. Take care of yourself. Real love is hard, too hard, so don't try. You're tired. You're right. So what if others get hurt. Hold fast to your opinion. Stand your ground. No need to work towards peace. Fight for what you know is right because you know they in the other camp are wrong. And in a sense, this worldly manifesto has been brought to life before us as we look at the protests in Portland, Oregon. For 94 straight nights, one group of protesters has been working against either city and state police or the federal police or counter-protesters often Trump supporters. So, you've got this sort of Black Lives Matter group that is clashing with the authorities or with Trump supporters and last night as we have seen in our news this morning as the conflict erupted even more someone was shot and killed. In this situation in Portland, Oregon we see how difficult it is to live peaceably with others. Often because we consider those others as something other than our neighbors so much so that we fight with them and sometimes we even take their lives. Now, Portland is a kind of dramatic embodiment of what this looks like. It's a big picture, almost a movie-type example of what the world is telling us to do. Don't care about that person. Take care of yourself. Ignore them. Take care of what you need on and on and on it goes, and that's the message of the world. But there is another or other manifestations of what this looks like, of what it looks like when you're worn down and it's really, really hard to love as God or Paul invites us to do. And I had a brief glimpse of this in my last past trip On Bainbridge Island in the state of Washington.

As the associate pastor responsible for caring for the congregation, that was my primary duty, one evening I got a call from a woman who had brought her mother into her home so that her mother could pass away peacefully. Her mother had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. The cancer was taking its slow, sweet time as it brought the mother closer and closer to death. I arrived near the end of the mother's life, but she was still alive and survived for just over another week. Now, the young woman who had brought in her mother to care for her thinking that it would have been just a couple of months was now-- it had now been just about a year, and she also was caring for a daughter who was 4 years old who had special needs. On the night in question, I met the daughter at the front door. She went into the kitchen. I went into the room where her mother was lying. I knelt down, said a few things, kissed her, took her hand, prayed for her, and then exited as quietly as I could from the room that she occupied.

I then walked down the hall into the kitchen to have a conversation with the daughter. But I was surprised to find the daughter sitting in front of the refrigerator crying. I can sort of imagine her leaving the room knowing that I was there and just putting her back against the cool fridge and kind of melting straight down the door onto the floor. So, I knelt down and simply asked, "How are you?" And through the sobs, she said, "This is so hard. I'm exhausted. I wish she would die. I've just had enough." Knowing the amount of love that this woman had provided her mother and her daughter, knowing how much she cared and loved both of them, knowing the sacrifice that she had paid to take care of them, I was not shocked when she said, "I just wish she would die." What she wanted for her mother was a peaceful passing and that was not happening. It was a long, slow crawl toward death. So rather than being shocked as I'm out there in front of her, I put my hands on her shoulders. and simply whispered, "I can only imagine." We stayed there for quite a while, her crying and me trying to collect myself as well. But the Portland protests and that moment with this exhausted woman, who melted down in front of the fridge, both point to the

difficulty of living out what Paul is inviting us to do, to live peaceably among all. As real people who are engaged in real life, there are times where we just don't have it anymore, where we say, "enough."

The protesters and the counter-protesters have both said, "enough." And this woman whose heart and soul were exhausted said the same, enough. I can understand that expression of the word "enough". As there have been times where I have wondered, do I have enough to keep going? I'm sure there are times in your lives where you may have said, "enough." Maybe in fact, you're saying it now. But what I've realized as I've sat this week thinking about the protests and not really knowing that there was gonna be a shooting, but knowing full well that there was this conflict amongst the different camps in Portland, and thinking about that moment when I was with that woman in her kitchen. What I've realized is that when we reach that moment where we say enough, there is a decision for us to make. Are we going to embrace the elemental spirits of the world and their manifesto which say, "Peace is impossible. Just take care of yourself" or are we going to return to Paul's understanding for what it means for us to be living a Christian life? Are we going to hear enough of an invitation to come back and turn again to Paul's road map for Christian living? Even though it's hard and comes at a cost to ourselves and sometimes comes at the recognition of the stress or strife that others are experiencing, will we strive to live peaceably with all when we hear our heart and our soul whisper, "enough"?

My hope is that we will strive and that we will let love be genuine. We will hate what is evil, we will hold fast to what is good, we will love one another with mutual affection, and we will outdo one another in showing affection because Paul is advocating for all of us to embody the goodness of Jesus Christ. So, when you hear that "enough" emerge in your life, I invite you to turn to Paul. Amen.