

“The Path of Peace is Not Easy”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, May 19, 2019

Luke 17:20-21; Colossians 3:12-15 (NIV)

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Revelation 21:4-6 (NIV)

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

The one who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then God said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

The one then said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.”

One of the first phrases Ruth and I learned when we moved to the Middle East in 2003 was “Salaam Alaykum.” It is nearly the exact same to the Aramaic phrase Jesus and his disciples would have used 2000 years ago, “salaam alykem”—which simply means “peace to you.” It was cute hearing our young children practicing this foreign phrase; they were so young then, one still a toddler and two barely out of the toddler stage: “Salaam alaykum.” And then the response was always a challenge because it was slightly longer: “Wa alaykum a salaam.” (“and peace to you”). There is something life-giving about this greeting, isn’t there? Like, “shalom” in Hebrew.

In our community we greatly value what we call the inward and outward journeys. The inward is focused on the spiritual steps we take to grow more deeply in our faith, our understanding of God and our understanding of ourselves. The inward journey is a key component of our faith walk. Our outward journey typically corresponds with the inward; it is the manifestation of all the internal spiritual work, as acted out in our lives. It is the “doing” portion of our walk. Here we exercise our love lived out in the world, our mission (or missions). These symbiotic iterations of our spiritual path collectively channel love for self and love for others—and this critical combination of efforts can often be referred to simply as our love for God.

So, shortly after the initial toppling of the Iraqi regime in 2003, I had the unique opportunity to visit the Iraqi village of Safwan, just on the border with Kuwait, only 20 minutes from our new home. I was there as a humanitarian, delivering school supplies on behalf of a group of educators. My Arabic was still limited, but when I heard Shaikh Ali greet our caravan with two simple words, “Salaam Alaykum” (peace to you), I remember filling chills. The moment affected me because here you have a man, a community leader, a local shaikh who had been jailed as a political prisoner for over a decade and after spending years on the receiving end of torture and pain, loneliness and despair, he was suddenly free—and in his early moments of newfound freedom, he greeted our caravan with a smile and a kiss, and the two simple words: Salaam alaykum (PEACE to you). How can a victim of war, of hostility, of aggression, of

violence, suddenly turn their own reaction as an action of peace? He wanted to rebuild his Shiihite community, which had suffered under the Sunni regime before it. He did not want revenge or violent payback in any form against his enemies. He simply wanted peace. And for him, peace started with restoring education for the children of his village. Needless to say his act of peacefulness affected my own sense of justice, and challenged me to reassess my own understanding of what true peace entails.

The Dali Lama says in his book *"Ethics for the New Millennium,"* —*"Peace is not something which exists independently of us. But nor does war. It is true that certain individuals—political leaders, policymakers, army generals—do have particular grave responsibilities in respect to peace. However, these people do not come from nowhere. They are not born and brought up in outer space. Like us, they were nourished by their mother's milk and affection. They are members of our own human family and have been nurtured within the society which we as individuals have helped create. Peace in the world thus depends on peace in the hearts of individuals."* As the Dali Lama clearly connects us to the root of peace, we are reminded as spiritual people—it is up to us to follow a path of peace in all things. Even the great Tibetan leader concluded this thought by saying, *"This in turn depends on us all practicing ethics by disciplining our response to negative thoughts and emotions, and developing basic spiritual qualities."*

Peace as a spiritual practice or discipline is not always easy. Certainly for Shaikh Ali, to look his torturers in the eye and simply forgive them, choosing to live in peace rather than war was no easy choice. Each time we face hurt to choose the path of peace is not easy.

As our Lynchburg community mourns the violent death of High School senior Dre'yon Browley and the other student, JB, who is still in critical condition after being shot, I turn our thoughts to ourselves—are we fostering paths of peace in all aspects of our lives? Many of us may automatically respond with a silent "yes," which may very much be accurate. I ask that we each examine our spiritual journeys both inward and outward and ensure they are grounded in peace in every way. The community needs people of peace in their lives, active and present. The way this can begin, if it isn't completely ironed out quite like we want it to be yet is in the form of "radical welcome." This kind of "welcome" is not just simply saying the word and gesturing someone into our space—it is an embracing of another physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually—radically.

Our former pastor David Edwards, gave an amazing explanation in in one of his sermons, when he said, *"This word 'welcome' is very profound... It means loving others as we ourselves have been loved by God. It means that the divine love that has fully embraced us, with all of our weaknesses and failures and confusions, is to flow through us toward each person. One of the disciplines in 'Our Covenant One with Another,' the commitment made by Covenant Members in this community, states that we 'will endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.' It is the most challenging of the disciplines. It is easy to believe ourselves to be loving, welcoming people, showing forgiveness and acceptance to all. But the reality is that as soon as someone expresses a different opinion about something or seems to us somehow inferior in understanding or faith, our impatience, judgmentalism, and anger flare up. We have made them into an enemy, an object, not a person like ourselves. And we set ourselves over against them, wanting to change them, to make them into the image of what we think they ought to be."* (12/8/2013).

Jesus said that the "kingdom of God" is not like any earthly kingdom we can see or that history writes about. There's no physical castle or marching army. He said the kingdom of God is "within you." Jesus didn't use the kingdom metaphor lightly. The reason citizens choose to live inside the "kingdom" is

because of a promise of peace and security. That is, God operating in the realm of our inward journey ensures there is a reign of peace in our lives. Peace is a benefit of God's kingdom living inside of us. It manifests outwardly when we've truly internalized it first. In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul talks of this outward appearance, how it plays out among us in the physical world: Through our actions of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience," we ultimately achieve "unity." In other words, "peace." He said, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Like Shaykh Ali, we have a choice. The path of peace is ours to faithfully follow, and by doing so, others will follow too... and we pray our community finds healing and comfort as they see us on this path and choose to also find their own paths of peace. We are not naïve, though, to realize that it is in our welcome itself—our radical love for others, a deep, authentic willingness to accept others despite our differences, and I mean really accept one another, embracing each other, that we **create peace** together.

Salaam alaykum