

He Is Our Peace

Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22

I read an article about Emo Phillips, a comedian back in the 1980's. A lot of his jokes were based on wordplay and had a religious or faith aspect to them. For instance:

"When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bike. Then I realized that the Lord doesn't work that way. So I just stole one and asked him to forgive me."

"So I went to Israel, and I'm at the Wailing Wall...like a moron, with my harpoon." I had to think about that one for a little while.

One of Philips's jokes was voted the best religious joke of all time.

"Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, 'Don't do it!' He said, 'Nobody loves me.' I said, 'God loves you. Do you believe in God?'

"He said, 'Yes'...I said, 'Are you a Christian or a Jew?' He said, 'A Christian'...I said, 'Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?' He said, 'Protestant.' I said, "'Me, too! What denomination?' He said, 'Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?' He said, 'Northern Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?'

He said, 'Northern Conservative Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?' He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.' I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?' He said, 'Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.' I said, 'Die, heretic!' And I pushed him over."

That is a particularly appropriate joke for our reading from Ephesians. This passage talks about peace, but it's not specifically about peace among nations. It's about peace within the congregation, peace within the church.

The basic disagreement is about whether or not Gentiles, non-Jewish people, need to be circumcised in order to be saved. The Council of Jerusalem back in Acts 15 had decided that no, they didn't need to be circumcised, but the issue kept coming up in local settings.

That's what Paul is addressing here. He starts out by describing how the Gentiles were not originally part of the covenant, how they were "separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world." Then Paul talks about how both groups, Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, are no longer two separate groups but one group, no longer two humanities but one humanity.

So, how did this happen?...Through the cross. Through the shedding of Christ's own blood. Hear Paul's words again: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

One commentary I read made this statement – listen to it carefully, "Note how we have been brought near. It was 'by the blood of Christ.' It took violence to stop the war, to bridge the gap between outsider and insider, and bring peace. This counter-intuitive message is the heart of the Gospel".

While that message is the heart of the gospel, I don't find it counter-intuitive (contrary to common sense) at all. It did take violence to bridge the gap between outsider and insider. It did take the shedding of blood to reconcile the world to God. But it's not Jesus who shed's the blood of others. It's Jesus whose blood is shed. Strength and power is not demonstrated by the shedding of blood; it's demonstrated by willingly letting your blood

be shed. The forgiveness of sins doesn't come from the strong, muscular parts of Jesus's body; rather, it comes from the wounded, weak and broken places from which the blood of redemption flows.

Through Jesus's sacrifice, we within the congregation are made one. We within the denomination are made one. All people are made one...

That has been a central insight of the Brethren since we began in 1708. It's wrong to shed blood. It's wrong to go to war. It was tough for the Brethren during the Revolutionary War, as they refused to take up arms against the British. It was tough for the Brethren in the Civil War, as they would not fight for either the North or the South. It was especially difficult for Brethren who lived in the South, as the denomination was opposed to slavery. Many of us have heard the story of John Kline, a Brethren elder who traveled back and forth across the battle lines to tend to the sick and wounded and preach the gospel. He was killed by the Confederates on his way home from Annual Conference, where he had been the moderator, in 1864.

Up until the early 20th century, members of the Church of the Brethren were prohibited from service in the military and had to promise to follow the church's teachings on this matter as a condition of membership. In 1935 Annual Conference affirmed that "all war is sin." However, as time has gone on, the peace position has become less practiced among the members of the Brethren, and while it is still the official position of the church it is no longer enforced as a requirement of membership...

Culture has influenced the church, but at the same time the church has influenced the culture. In World War I, there was conscientious objection to killing and war, but no one had actually decided what to do with these objectors. By World War II, conscientious objectors had options for alternative service specifically because of efforts of the Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Quakers. Those efforts led to the creation of the

Center on Conscience and War founded in 1940 which continues to advocate for the rights of conscience, opposes military conscription, and serves all conscientious objectors to war. In 1948 our denomination voted to begin Brethren Volunteer Service, which continues today as an alternative way to serve our nation and was an integral part in the formation of the U.S. Peace Corp.

I could go on with the history, but the history isn't the point. Peace is the point. Peace gained not at the barrel of a gun, peace gained not through the targeting of a drone, peace gained not through the shedding of the blood of others, but peace gained through faith in Christ. Christ, who allowed his blood to be shed for us...all of us. Christ through whose blood we are made one.

Sure, there are people out there who maybe want to kill us, or even if they don't want to kill us may do so if we get in the way of something that they want. There is evil in the world. There is violence in the world.

That's why I wanted us to read the 23rd Psalm. As you know, in that Psalm we are the sheep. We find peace, with cool waters to drink and green pastures to lie down in. We are sheep, peaceful, relaxing, feeding, growing wool, taking it easy. But why? Why should the sheep be able to be peaceful? Shouldn't we sheep be on the watch? Shouldn't one of us keep a lookout? There are wolves. There are thieves. There are things out there that will hurt us or kill us...

No! The shepherd takes care of those things. As Jesus said in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The sheep are kept whole, kept together, kept one, by the sacrifice of the shepherd.

Conflict is everywhere. In our own homes, in our own communities, in our own congregations and denomination. Peace is what we want. Peace is what we need. In the

end, peace is found through right relationship with Jesus Christ. Through his blood we are made one. He is our peace. Amen.

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