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Ephesians 2:11-22 Journey Forward: Witness to God's Peace

Today is the third Sunday of utilizing material from Journey Forward from Mennonite Church USA. During the first Sunday Luke Gascho provided an excellent introduction to Journey Forward, as well as tackling the significant context of who am I? And where am I? Luke's teaching provided the foundation for us to begin looking at the three Renewed Commitments which are to Follow Jesus, Witness to God's Peace, and Experience Transformation.

You might recall the first Sunday we had a bulletin insert that explained the three commitments, as well as provided a short and yet significant introduction to them. Listen again to the introduction to these renewed commitments:

God invites us to experience and bear witness to the belovedness of all creation. We yearn to know and share in the mystery of God's unending love.

We confess that sin fragments our wholeness and strains our relationships with God, each other and the world. Confronted with the misuses of power in our lives, communities and institutions, we seek to tell the truth and repent.

The Holy Spirit beckons us toward the restoration of all things in Christ. God continually calls us beloved. On this journey together, we commit to...

And then we find these three renewed commitments:

First, to Follow Jesus. As an Anabaptist community of the living Word, we listen for God's call as we read Scripture together, guided by the Spirit. Through baptism we commit ourselves to live faithfully as Jesus' disciples, no matter the cost.

Last Sunday Pastor Neil led us in looking at this first renewed commitment - Follow Jesus. In his sermon he encouraged us all to consider the ways we follow Jesus on the path of discipleship, for it is here that it all begins. We each were challenged to prayerfully consider how we are being called to follow Jesus.

Today then we move to looking at the second of the renewed commitments, Witness to God's Peace. It is stated like this:

We are called to extend God's holistic peace, proclaiming Christ's redemption for the world with our lives. Through Christ, God frees the world from sin and offers reconciliation. We bear witness to this gift of peace by rejecting violence and resisting injustice in all forms, and in all places.

I would pause here to highlight a couple of the words in this statement. First it is stated in the first person plural – we. Witnessing to God's peace is something that we are all called to do, and in some way we do together. Secondly, there are action words in this statement. Both actions that we do, and actions from the members of Trinity. So *we* are called to extend, proclaim, bear witness, reject, and resist. Members of the Trinity frees and offers. This is not a passive calling, but a vibrantly active and engaged one.

Thirdly, I would note the inclusivity of this statement.... “proclaiming Christ's redemption for the world”, “God frees the world”, “resisting injustice in all forms,” “and in all places.” As Luke said on the first Sunday, we don't need to spend too much time deciding the boundaries or the parameters, all means all.

This second renewed commitment holds together the understanding that our citizenship belongs in another kingdom. And again as Luke shared in his sermon, part of our challenge and our calling is to discern how to live in the kingdom of this world, while belonging to another. And so we are called to witness to God's peace. On one hand this sounds rather easy, and yet as we dig into it I fear we will begin to realize just how complex and multifaceted it really is.

The calling to witness to peace leads us to recognize that peace is not the mere absence of war. Instead it also encompasses the call to justice and reconciliation as peace and justice are

intricately intertwined.<sup>i</sup> To begin to grasp the implications of that statement I invite you to turn with me to our passage of scripture for today, found in Ephesians chapter 2.

You know, sometimes we just make things way more difficult than they need to be. I find this to be the case sometimes when we approach God's Word. Sometimes we look at these simple words and try to dissect, and analyze, and research, and overly complicate things. Don't get me wrong. Sometimes the text does not appear straightforward, or one that easily yields itself to a clear understanding or application. However, I think we can probably agree that in our humanness it is often easy to make the text be more complicated than it really is. Well, I'll speak for myself. I do this. And I often find myself digging deeper and dissecting the text because the most apparent understanding or application is one that I just frankly don't like. The Bible is filled with hard teachings. Friends, if following Jesus was easy and without any cost, wouldn't everyone be doing it? Instead as Neil reminded us last week, discipleship is a way of life, and it doesn't promise to be easy or without pain. In fact, the very path of discipleship might just cost us our lives. So why do I say all of that now? Well, today's text and its applications can be difficult to hear on various levels, and yet it appears the text preaches itself.

Let's back up a little bit. The Apostle Paul is writing to the Ephesians and is recognizing that divisions remain among the believers. Walls have been erected. People are given labels of insiders or outsiders. Circumcised or uncircumcised. You can also imagine the divided scene of one group on one side, and one group on the other side, and a sea of separation between them. In this letter Paul provides this concise and powerful teaching on reconciliation made possible in Christ. In this passage Paul speaks of both Jews and Gentiles, those who are part of the polarized groups.

Paul begins his passage by asking the readers to remember. Remember where you came from. Remember how you got to this place. Remember what Jesus did. Remember who Jesus is. Sometimes like the Ephesians I think that we too have lapses of amnesia. We forget where we came from. We forget that we too had once been outsiders – every single one of us. There is real danger in forgetting. If we forget we grow in our sense of entitlement. If we forget that we had been outsiders, then we can become gatekeepers keeping other outsiders out.

Paul reminds the Ephesians and us, that at one time we too were separated from Christ, without hope, without a promise. But now, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Jesus. There is mystery in that statement. There is grace, abundant grace in that statement.

Paul goes on to describe that Jesus is our peace, and that Jesus makes and proclaims peace. The word peace in “biblical texts means so much more than the absence of conflict. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, (this word) usually translates (or is deeply connected with) the Hebrew word Shalom, as in New Testament. Shalom means well-being and wholeness, encompassing all of the concerns of human life – individual, personal, social, and religious.”<sup>ii</sup> One definition of shalom I have valued over the years is the concise definition of: nothing missing, nothing broken.

Paul writes in verse 14 that Christ is our peace. Christ is that which brings wholeness to what is broken, inclusion to that which is excluded, harmony in the presence of discord, peace in the midst of hostility. Christ has become our peace through the cross, through his sacrifice of love, through his blood that covers our sins. In his act of selfless love we are able to be reconciled to God through Christ, the one who is our peace. However, reconciliation does not stop there. There are cosmic and corporate dimensions to our salvation. Paul continues on in his

writing to declare that Jesus has destroyed the barrier, tore down the wall that divides us, preached peace to those near and far, and created one humanity who are now, through Jesus, reconciled to each other. How did Jesus accomplish tearing down these walls and creating one humanity? Well, “He repeatedly crossed cultural, religious, and political boundaries to reach those on the other side (women, Samaritans, lepers, Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners) and to welcome them into fellowship with himself and thus into the Kingdom of God. Crossing over such boundaries to be with the “others” was (and still is) dangerous, and was part of what got Jesus crucified... he embraced both insiders and outsiders and so made peace.”<sup>iii</sup>

As followers of Jesus we also profess that it our calling to become more and more like Jesus, the boundary crosser. Our love should reflect his love. Our actions should reflect his priorities. In short, we too should always be a “community on the lookout for walls to breach, for enemies to befriend – with each other and with God. With respect to a reconciling and re-creating God, God’s home is never big enough; better yet, God’s family is never big enough. With respect to those people and peoples still estranged from God and God’s family, there will always be room. God’s home is permanently under construction.”<sup>iv</sup> With this understanding we can also see how evangelism and peacemaking go hand in hand. The message of reconciliation is both being reconciled with God and reconciled with others. And we are called to witness to God’s peace which is rooted in the saving act of Jesus’ death and resurrection, a saving act done on behalf of all.

How do we do this in real life? What does it look like to witness to God’s peace? How do we become midwives in the ministry of reconciliation? To begin with must remember who we are, where we have come from, who is God, and what is our ministry. As we join in Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation then we too must fight against every injustice and stand with the

oppressed and marginalized. We must build bridges and not walls. We must be people of shalom and not people of violence. We must extend the welcome to all and not be people of fear or hatred. We must find our commonality with those who appear different from us. We must, we must remember where we have come from. We too were once outsiders and through Jesus we have been reconciled to God and reconciled to others.

I recognize that the scope of this topic is huge and can feel overwhelming to know where to begin. I encourage you to begin by smiling at others. Looking them in the eyes, seeing them, really seeing them, and smiling and offering a greeting. Smile at people at the grocery store, at the park, at the bank, on the sidewalk. “As human beings, it is our natural tendency to classify and separate ourselves from those who are different from us. That classification and separation takes all forms: gender, age, race, ethnicity, (sexual orientation), education, socio-economic, religion ... and the list goes on.”<sup>v</sup> Instead of working hard to find the ways others are different from us, and therefore we decide they are the outsiders and we are the insiders, decide instead to celebrate the ways we are alike, the ways we are reconciled into one body.

One specific avenue to travel to witness to God’s peace is to recognize and fight against the racial injustice in our country. A significant step on this journey is removing the blinders that have distorted our vision. Another step is to actively push back against the rise of white supremacy and call those actions and beliefs a sin, outside God’s design for reconciliation and the creation of one humanity. Jesus died for all. The invitation is for all. Reconciliation with God is for all, and reconciliation between groups of people is for all. All means all.

To close with I want to share a short video that was produced by Mennonite Mission Network and the Peace and Justice Network. Like the message of Ephesians 2, the message of this short video may also be difficult to digest, and yet I deeply believe that it too is a message

we need to hear today as we hear the calling to witness to God's peace. As we engage in Jesus' ministry of reconciliation let us remember that Jesus wasn't white, and let us confess the ways we have forgotten that truth as we join the Spirit in naming racial injustice and in seeking racial reconciliation as we witness to God's peace.

May God guide each of us in the ways of reconciliation and peace. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Leader, 53

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians* (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 111.

<sup>iii</sup> Brian Peterson, "Commentary on Ephesians 2:11-22,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3748](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3748)

<sup>iv</sup> Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 134.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.pjsn.org/resources/worship-resources/peace-sunday/459/Full%20membership%20in%20Christ's%20new%20humanity>