

Title: Blessed Are The Peacemakers
Text: Matthew 5:9
Date: October 7, 2018

We are taking a break from the Gospel of Mark this week to provide special focus on World Communion Sunday, which falls on the first Sunday of every October. But there are other things on our mind today as well. Today we collect our Peacemaking Offering, which ties in perfectly to the Feast day of St. Francis, which falls on the 4th of every October. And this emphasis on peace connects to another prompt on the Presbyterian Planning Calendar: Domestic Violence Awareness Sunday. I hope this is not overly ambitious, but I actually have a vision of how these divergent emphases are related. Bear with me as I strive to weave these topics together. With all this in mind, my text is one line from The Beatitudes: **"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."** (Matt. 5:9)

First, some background to World Communion Sunday might be of interest. Starting in 1940, this day is celebrated amongst several Christian denominations, and designed to promote Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation.

For those of you who like to cheer for the home team, the origins can be traced back further to 1933, where it was conceived of by Dr. David Kerr, pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA. Dr. Kerr had just completed a term as Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, and was inspired by the call for churches to work together.

People did not give too much thought to the celebration at first, but it was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because there was a sense of just trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense, united by the call of Christ. As we recognize our kinship with believers worldwide, we also celebrate the Christ who peacefully shares God-given goods in a world increasingly destabilized by globalization and global market economies based on greed. So we too gather today as people who are just trying to hold it together.

We celebrate our unity today as followers of the "Prince of Peace." (Is. 9:6) As we gather around the table today, Jim Wallis reminds us that, as peacemakers, **"We must follow the leadership of the One who was willing to bear the cost of making peace in a hostile world."** Furthermore Jim Wallis reminds us that anyone can love peace, but Jesus didn't say, **"Blessed are the peace-lovers."** He says **"peacemakers."** Something that must be actively engaged in. Thinking theologically, Glen Stassen stresses that **"Being a peacemaker is part of being surrendered to God, for God brings peace. We abandon the effort to get our needs met through the destruction of enemies. God comes to us in Christ to make peace with us; and we participate in God's grace as we go to our enemies to make peace."**

There is no shortage of profound statements that can be found to reinforce the call to being peacemakers. Likewise there is no shortage of arenas in which to practice peacemaking. There were intentional peacemaking efforts in northern Ireland in the late 20th century where people spoke euphemistically of "the troubles," when referring to a low-level war between Catholics and Protestants. There are intentional peacemaking efforts targeting the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, which has essentially become an archetypical example of an intractable conflict. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a veritable Christian saint when it came to being a peacemaker in our own racially divided United States. There is no shortage of examples of extraordinary peacemakers.

It has sometimes been said that a pastor's call is to preach with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other hand. As I look at the news these days I hear the powerful, moving testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. I hear the reverberation of a chorus of women saying

“Me too!” I likewise hear the condescending tones of men of power who are annoyed that this is making achieving their goals more problematic. This is all reflected in a country deeply divided.

Is this a proper domain for Christian peacemaking? I would say, “Hell, yes!” And I would hasten to add that peacemaking does not mean, “Can’t we all just calm down, and speak more softly?” Peacemaking means bringing about God’s Shalom . . . *and we certainly have a lot of work to do!*

In my mind I also draw a distinction between the work of an ally, and work as an expression of my identity. I have long been an advocate of feminism. Back in the 1980s I was the only male I knew of in my circle of friends who was a card-carrying member of the National Organization for Women. When I joined the Presbytery of Cincinnati, I was the first male who ever *asked* to serve on what was then called the Women’s Concerns Committee. Still, these were just supporting roles. It is in a supporting role then, that I am encouraged by the countless women who are speaking out in the so-called “MeToo Movement” . . . as painful as that process is.

But let me highlight one of the many details that disturbed me this past week. One of our elected officials was clueless enough to say, **“It is a very scary time for young men in America.”** Seriously? And it hasn’t been a scary time for women in America for generations? I have never been the victim of attempted rape, but statistics show that 1 in 6 women have been the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. Females ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault. Women ages 18-24 who are college students are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence. There is good reason why so many women were riveted to the testimony of Dr. Blasey Ford. And you think this is a scary time for young *men* in America?

I am not politically astute enough to know all that must be done in the present. However, let me tell you what is on my mind. In my call to be a peacemaker – in my call to walk in the way and the spirit of Jesus – I feel like we need to do a better job of raising boys. I like the aspiration expressed in Richard Rohr’s book title: “From Wild Men to Wise Men.” Even as Christians, we have been too complicit in simply trusting that our culture will produce mature males if just left alone.

Speaking as a cisgender male, I am embarrassed by the behavior of many of my “peeps.” I am embarrassed by men who clearly objectify and demean women, whether that be in-person or online. I am embarrassed by men who come with their own sense of male entitlement. I am embarrassed by men who get caught up in the rush of their own rage, complete with red face and flared nostrils. As my mama used to teach me: “Weak argument? Yell like hell!” I am saddened by men who don’t have the time of day to take a woman’s story seriously. I am disappointed in men who – when encountering a difference of opinion – have no other tool in their toolbox than to fight it out.

Now to be clear, I am not advocating for the feminization of men, whatever that means. It is more that I am advocating for the humanization of men. It is more that I am advocating for men to walk in the way and spirit of Jesus. I am advocating for men to have values that extend beyond reducing everything to winners or losers.

I’ve read numerous articles on how to raise a son who will grow up to respect women. Some of the points raised include:

- Talk openly about women’s rights — without blame. Share with your sons some truths about women’s struggle for equality. For example, mention that women couldn’t vote in America until 1920, or point out that most world leaders are male.

- Role model how to speak about women respectfully. Associating morality with the way a woman dresses, or pointing out her worth in terms of her appearance, has implications for how boys perceive the value of women. Call them out on sexism.
- Show that all women have the ability to achieve success — whatever their choices.
- Make it clear that emotions are OK. Generations of boys have been raised to 'do' rather than to feel. Too often, boys are praised for their accomplishments and not for how they treat their friends.
- Do not serve your sons. It's still common for mothers to serve their sons everything from food to domestic cleanliness, while daughters help with cooking and cleaning.
- As much as possible, get fathers involved in the day-to-day work of parenting, to convey to your boys that dads *matter*.
- Let feminism open the discussion to other inequalities. Emphasizing feminist ideals inevitably shines a light on the unequal distribution of power throughout society in general.
- Talk about boundaries and consent. Even with young children, parents can emphasize that people have a right to say “no” to someone else touching their body. For older boys, this might mean cultivating a clear conversation about consent.
- Build up boys. Boys who have a good sense of self are less likely to seek fulfillment in unhealthy ways. We have to raise them to like themselves, and to do that, we have to treat them with love and respect.
- Take sex education into your own hands. If parents say nothing to kids about sex, then they're going to learn all about it solely from the media, pornography, and other kids—all sources that aren't exactly teaching respect for women. (The average age of boys' exposure to pornography is 11.) Teach intimacy. When we separate physical and emotional intimacy from one another, we provide fertile soil for sexual miscommunication and sexual coercion.

In all likelihood, this is nothing like any other World Communion Sunday message you have ever heard before. I said I was going to strive to make all these divergent threads come together. Have I succeeded?

If we gather around the table to thank God for the one who emptied himself, we dare not go out and exalt ourselves. As we celebrate our unity with followers of Jesus around the world, we recognize as well that women's and girls' rights are a serious universal concern. If our faith is to be relevant at all, it must be relevant in every aspect of our lives.

Blessed are the peacemakers – those who usher in God's Shalom.

Amen