

## Agreeing to Disagree

"An artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought, the artist painted a beautiful country scene. There were green fields with cows standing in them, birds were flying in the blue sky and a lovely little village lay in a distant valley. The artist gave the picture to the man, but there was a look of disappointment on his face. The man said to the artist, "This isn't a picture of true peace. It isn't right. Go back and try again.

The artist went back to his studio, thought for several hours about peace, then went to his canvas and began to paint. When he was finished, there on the canvas was a beautiful picture of a mother, holding a sleeping baby in her arms, smiling lovingly at the child. He thought, surely, this is true peace, and hurried to give the picture to the wealthy man. But again, the wealthy man refused the painting and asked the painter to try again.

The artist returned again to his studio. He was discouraged, he was tired and he was disappointed. Anger swelled inside him, he felt the rejection of this wealthy man. Again, he thought, he even prayed for inspiration to paint a picture of true peace. Then, all of a sudden an idea came; he rushed to the canvas and began to paint as he had never painted before. When he finished, he hurried to the wealthy man.

He gave the painting to the man. He studied it carefully for several minutes. The artist held his breath. Then the wealthy man said, "Now this is a picture of true peace." He accepted the painting, paid the artist and everyone was happy.

And what was this picture of true peace?? The picture showed a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. The artist had captured the fury of the wind as it whipped black rain clouds which were laced with streaks of lightening. The sea was roaring in turmoil, waves churning, the dark sky filled with the power of the furious thunderstorm. And in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, the artist had painted a small bird, safe and dry in her nest snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird was at peace midst the storm that raged about her."

Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is not a surface level attempt to "being nice". We may think that all is peaceful if folks are blandly nice to each other; pleasantries are exchanged, when there is a certain level of politeness. We may act as if nice equals peace. Yet deep within we know that niceness often conceals hostility. It is easy to think of peace as passive niceness. We understand what we are to do when we think that we can make peace by avoiding confrontation.

But we cannot be the peacemakers God calls us to be by being nice, getting along and ignoring differences, conflicts and hurts. We don't make peace by avoiding the truth. We may push conflict to the side, but it will hit us anyway. We cannot be peacemakers if we chose to ignore those who upset, challenge or irritate us. Peace cannot exist where selfishness, bitterness and passive-aggressiveness are not rooted out like weeds. In the artist's final painting the bird and the storm, co-existing, together represent peace.

Peace, in the biblical context, is not an absence of war; it does not abolish conflict or create harmony where everyone gets what they want. We live in a world where “instant gratification” is held forth as a right. We are taught not to look at long term or far reaching effects. We find it painful to get out of our comfort zones and reach those who are strangers to God, and we are schooled to avoid pain. We settle for too little. We miss unique opportunities to be the agents of peace. We complain rather than lovingly and boldly confronting. We look out for ourselves rather than seek to hear the needs and desires of others. Our aim is more often for “everyone to be happy” than for everyone to be challenged to grow in the image and ministry of Christ.

When we “interpret” the teachings of Matthew we hear “sin against you” as anything that we do not like, agree with or understand, rather than as a call for each of us to be concerned with and address the ways of ungodliness or turning from the hard work of striving to live faithfully in all moments and aspects of life in our lives and the lives of those with whom we are united with in Christ’s name. We consider the purpose of confrontation to be resolution, rather than exploration and expanded understanding of another.

As the church we are called to challenge the ways of the world and to practice and hone our skills within the community so that we can better live them out in the world. Church is where we are called to see that conflict is the path to peace and that peace is a process and not a result. Christ modeled a life where nothing mattered other than seeking and honoring God, not personal comfort or desire, not being liked or even respected by others, not getting along or going along, and calls the church, Christ’s body, to such radical ways.

Christ calls the church to seek out those who are lost, lonely, looked over and left out. Christ calls the church to speak out against injustice, oppression, and captivity in what ever forms they are presented. We need to revise the mental images we form when we hear the words of Scripture. To consider that “2 or 3 together” may be closer to 3 fish caught in the same net than a small group who agree and want the same thing. To be in agreement may be closer to making a bargain, to agreeing to disagree, than all thinking and wanting the same thing, in all matters other than obedience and faithfulness to God.

Today as we consider and take part in the wonder of believers gathering at Christ’s table, around the world with all our differences bound together with a desire for peace, we need to name that this peace we are called to make it is not a peace defined by quietude and tranquility, but the peace, acceptance, respect and concern which comes with profound knowledge of all humanity belonging to family of God -- a family where all value others above them selves and God above all. A family that agrees to disagree, to confront differences, to seek holiness, to speak the truth in love, and to know that the storms of life will rage and that the call of the church is to build a nest large enough for all.