

Social Renewal

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[0 : 00] It is such a joy to be here. We look forward to this service every year, a chance to gather together to sing, to tell the great story of Christian hope together. We, every year during this service, we want to take one of the lessons that we read and think a little more about it and think about what it means for the world and for us today.

This lesson that we just heard comes from Luke chapter 2, and it has this amazing, amazing announcement. In Luke chapter 2, verse 14, upon the birth of Jesus into the world, this great angelic army, that's what host means, this army appears, and they begin to sing and to shout and to praise God by saying this.

They say, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. And that word peace is the emphasis.

In other words, what this is saying is, is that Christmas and the coming of Jesus into the world makes peace possible. And it's a kind of peace that uniquely becomes possible because of the coming of Jesus.

Peace with God and peace with other people. And it's important to say that when we talk about peace in this way, we're not just talking about a ceasefire. We're not just talking about coexistence like you might see on a bumper sticker.

[1 : 31] We're talking about something much deeper. The word peace is rooted in the Old Testament word shalom, which perhaps you're familiar with. But the word shalom means wholeness.

It means psychological wholeness, physical wholeness, emotional wholeness, spiritual wholeness. And so shalom in a society looks like social wholeness, which means having all different kinds of people from all different walks of life, all different backgrounds, all different cultures and races and ethnicities and political persuasions, all different kinds of people living together in unity.

That's what social wholeness means. Shalom, to put it shortly, is simply the way life is supposed to be.

That's what shalom is. So the question that we're going to ask for just a little while before we go on with our service is, how does Jesus make this kind of peace possible? And the best place to understand that in Scripture comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians in chapter 2, just verses 14, 15, and 16.

I'll read those right now. For he himself, meaning Jesus, is our peace. He is our peace. Who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

[3 : 03] By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man or one new humanity in place of the two.

So making peace. And might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. So three things we'll see about peace this morning.

Why do we need it? Why are there problems to begin with? Why do we need peace? How does it become possible?

What makes it possible? And then lastly, how do we get it? So why do we need it? What makes it possible? How do we get it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you that as we gather together this morning, that as much preparation and time has been put in by volunteers and as much excitement as we feel about simply being together, and as much as there is this wonderful spirit of joy and togetherness, Lord, we know that our greatest hope comes from your word.

[4 : 15] And your word is able to reveal to us your living word, Jesus Christ. And we pray that whatever else happens this morning, Lord, that we would have the opportunity to see him face to

face through your word.

And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So the first question we'll ask briefly is when we look at the world, why do we need peace? Why is there not more peace in the world?

The specific issue that Paul is dealing with here in his letter to the Ephesians is a division that exists between the Jews and the Gentiles. And when we think about Jews and Gentiles, that's how they divided the world.

The entire world was divided into two categories, Jews and Gentiles, Jews and everyone else. And the Jews essentially looked down on the Gentiles and mockingly called them the uncircumcision. And what this means is that the division that existed between these two groups was because of a physical difference. Jews were circumcised and Gentiles were not. And so Jews mocked Gentiles for this, and Gentiles were pretty unkind to the Jews because of this as well.

[5 : 25] And so there was a division. And then it talks about the dividing wall of hostility. And in this case, the dividing wall was literally a wall that was in the temple in Jerusalem that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Jews were allowed to stand and worship closer to the presence of God. Gentiles had to stand further back. Now this is deeply tragic if you understand the whole purpose of circumcision to begin with.

God had originally called the Jews to become circumcised as a symbol of their unique relationship with him. So that when people saw the circumcision, they would think of God and that special relationship.

And the idea was this, that the Jews were meant to go out into all of the world and to become a blessing to all of the nations. And then those nations would experience the blessing.

They would recognize this unique mark on these Jewish people. They would then recognize the special relationship with God that that represented. They would then realize that God is actually the source of all blessing in the world.

[6 : 32] And the hope was that they would then come to worship and know God themselves. So this was the original purpose. It was meant to be a way for the Jews to become a blessing to the nations by introducing them to the source of blessing, which is God himself.

But that purpose became twisted. Instead of being a symbol of God's grace and blessing, circumcision, this physical difference, became a symbol of moral and spiritual superiority. It became a dividing wall of hatred. And this shows us something very important about the human heart. Human beings tend to take things that make us different from one another and to assign moral significance to those things.

We tend to take the distinctives that differentiate us from one another and to elevate certain distinctives and allow them to take an ultimate place in our hierarchy.

And then we look down with contempt and disrespect on all those who do not share that distinctive. And we see this in all kinds of ways, great and small.

[7 : 51] You know, this can show up in the most subtle of ways, walking down the street with your Whole Foods bag and seeing other people. And the tendency that we may have to assume that if somebody doesn't eat organic and shop at Whole Foods, they must be lazy or not care about their health or the world.

Assuming that people who are homeless are there because of their moral failings, that they're there by choice. Assuming that some people are inherently superior to other people simply because of something like skin color.

Assuming that people on the other side of the political aisle are not simply people with different ideas about how to solve the problems of the world, but they're actually evil.

You know, when you talk to people on both sides of the aisle, you get the sense that they see their opponents as being not only unintelligent, but wicked. Morally corrupt.

Morally corrupt. And no matter how much we resist this temptation, we tend to divide the world into two groups. In group and out group.

[9 : 00] Us and them. And you even see this in our neurochemistry. There's a chemical in the brain called oxytocin that you're probably familiar with. It is the neurohormone that is responsible for creating that intense feeling of love and affection and empathy.

It's called the bonding hormone because it leads us to feel bonded and connected with other people. But there was research done on oxytocin a few years ago that made a remarkable

discovery.

And that is this. That oxytocin is only produced in the brain when you are perceiving a person as being in your in group. If you perceive that person as being on your out group, the oxytocin is not produced.

So even in our brains, our physiological neurochemistry, we see this tendency to divide. That is pre-conscious. It's not even something that we're aware of happening.

And yet it does. And so this tendency that we see in ourselves to divide the world into us and them, this is the reason that so much of our history involves horrible war and bloodshed.

[10:14] This is the reason when you look at the ancient world that slavery was ubiquitous. It was ubiquitous. And the reason is because we can always find reasons to justify devaluing other people.

It is simply hardwired into us. And so if this is the state of the world, then what do we need to make peace possible? What's the answer to an issue that runs this deep in the human heart?

And the answer that comes from the gospel is pretty shocking. It says in verse 15 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verse 15, Jesus makes peace by creating in himself one new man, or that would be better translated, one new humanity.

That Jesus actually creates in himself one new humanity, a new way of being human that didn't exist before. So what we see is that Jesus makes peace by creating in himself a new kind of human being and then inviting people into that way of being human.

It's an entirely new identity from the ground up. And what we see here is that this identity, this Christian identity, is holistic.

[11:37] It involves every part of us. So becoming a Christian doesn't just mean adopting a new set of beliefs. And I think that our default is to think of it that way. Well, there's this set of beliefs and this set of beliefs and this set of beliefs, and I'll adopt this one.

And so a way of thinking about it is like the difference between an operating system and an app. Right? So most people tend to think of religion as an app.

Right? You have your sort of core identity, your core operating system, and then you look around at the different aspects of your life. You have your job or your career. You have your schooling and your education. You have your socioeconomic status.

You have your family. You have your hobbies and interests. You have the volunteer work that you do on the weekends. And then one of those apps, one of those aspects of you is your set of religious beliefs.

So most people think of it like an app. But what this shows us is that the gospel isn't just an app. It's not just something to add on to your existing identity.

[12:39] The gospel comes into your life and it begins to completely supplant whatever identity was there before from the ground up. It's an entirely new operating system that is governed by a completely different set of rules, a completely different set of values.

And you know when you install a new operating system on any of your devices, that operating system not only changes the core system, but it requires everything else to change as a result. So some of your apps have to be updated so that they'll work on the new operating system. And every now and then you have an app that becomes obsolete. It will no longer run on the new operating system.

It's incompatible and it needs to be deleted altogether. And so we see this same thing play out when people come to genuine gospel-centered faith.

When you become a Christian, all of the other aspects of your life then have to be re-evaluated through the lens of the gospel. You begin to think about your family differently. You begin to think about your values and priorities differently.

[13:45] You begin to think about how you spend your money and your time differently. You begin to think about other people differently. It all begins to get re-evaluated. And some things get updated, right, so that they align with the gospel.

And every now and then, something just needs to be deleted altogether. It's no longer compatible with the identity that you have in Christ. So if you just to take one example of this for the sake of time, think about politics.

I know you think about politics. Think about politics. You know, research a few years ago found that for most people, I don't know if you'll identify this, but for most people in our society, their political identity is deeper and more defining than their racial identity, ethnic identity, or religious identity.

So when it comes to politics and faith, research has shown that for most people in our society, their political identity will remain stable over time, and their religious beliefs and their religious affiliation will shift around that political identity.

So the core operating system, this survey has shown, for many people, the core operating system that defines people is their political persuasion. And so this reason, I think, sits under the fact that many churches that you go to are politically homogenous.

[15 : 13] They may advertise themselves as being very welcoming, but if you actually come in the doors, and you share different, and you have different political beliefs, you will not fit in, and you will not be welcome.

Right? And so most of the time, you see churches that are politically homogenous. The thing that we need to understand is, when the gospel becomes the new operating system, when that supplants your identity, begins to rebuild you from the ground up, and politics becomes simply one of the many aspects of your identity that needs to be reevaluated through the lens of the gospel, that creates the space and the freedom for you to reexamine your political beliefs.

And it means that gospel-centered churches can and should be politically diverse. They should be places where people feel the freedom to disagree politically, and to debate tough issues on a political and on a policy level, because they're not defined by those things, because they share a unity that runs much deeper.

In a gospel-centered community, we have the freedom to recognize and to celebrate and to validate the beauty of racial and ethnic and cultural differences without being threatened by them.

We have the freedom to look at our own cultural heritage through a critical lens. Right? And we also have the freedom to disagree and debate our political differences.

[16 : 42] We can do all of this and still be perfectly unified, because the unity is not ultimately political. It's not intellectual. It's not cultural. It is spiritual.

That is the power of a new humanity that we find in Jesus Christ, a common humanity, which, by the way, is what the Bible says from the very beginning, that God's original intention was to create all human beings to bear his image, to be one in their identity with one another and with him.

And so this is simply restoring God's original intention for human beings. So if that's the reason that we need peace, because our hearts tend to build walls, and if the way that peace comes is through Jesus' establishing of a new humanity and inviting us in, then how do we get it?

How does that actually happen? This is our final question for this morning. And this brings us to the heart of the Christian hope, which is the gospel. Jesus came, as it says in verse 16, to reconcile all of us to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility and killing the hatred.

In our society, there are many things that divide us. I don't have to list them for you. You can probably think of them yourself. There are many things that divide us, and some of these things, like race or politics, seem utterly insurmountable.

[18 : 18] They can lead to feelings of despair and hopelessness. Believe me, I've wrestled with that myself. But the answer comes from recognizing that true peace, which is the shalom that we're talking about, is only going to be possible if we recognize that there is one dividing wall that matters more than all of the others.

It's not to say that the others don't matter, but there is one that has to take priority for us, and that is the wall that stands between all human beings and God. One of the most shocking things that Paul says to the Jews is at the end of the day, they're no better than the Gentiles.

They have no greater standing before God than the Gentiles, that their illusion of spiritual superiority is just that. It's an illusion. At the end of the day, all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, which would encompass everyone, we have all actively participated in the building of a wall that separates us from God.

Because in our hearts, we want to ignore God in the world that he made. We want to live apart from him and to set ourselves up as gods. And so the Bible says that we have all built this wall, we all hold it up in our lives.

And the gospel says this amazing fact that Jesus, because of his love for us, because of his love for all nations, not just one particular people group, but everyone, took all of the hostility, took all of the hatred, took all of the animosity into himself, and then he went to the cross.

[20 : 07] And it says this amazing thing that when he died, when he said, it is finished, he was talking about the end of that hostility and the end of that hatred.

He was talking about the walls crashing down in the world. The wall between humanity and God came crashing down. It is finished. The wall between human beings and one another came crashing down.

It is finished. So now the good news of the gospel is all we need to cross that divide is faith. That's all it requires to put our faith in Jesus, to be reconciled to God, which then makes it possible to begin to be reconciled with everyone else in the world.

Now you say, well that's amazing news, but I look around and there are lots of Christians in the world and the world is still a very broken place. It's still a very divided place. So where's the disconnect?

When the Iron Curtain was built, a part of it that was more like a fence than a curtain separated the border of Germany from the border of what is now the Czech Republic.

[21 : 18] And when that fence was put in, it separated a herd of red deer. And so from the time that fence went in, you had this herd divided and you had one living in the German side and you had one living in the Czech Republic side.

And then the wall finally came down in 1989. Some of you may remember that. And afterward, wildlife biologists went in and they began to study these populations of deer. And what they noticed is that the deer continued to live as though the fence was there.

The fence was gone, but the deer still behaved as though it was there. They refused to integrate. They tracked some deer with GPS devices. They would range thousands of miles, but they would never cross that invisible border.

They would go right up to the edge of where it had been and stand there. And then they would turn around and go in a different direction. And in fact, the most interesting thing of all, deer born decades after the fence was removed, born decades after the fence was removed, who never saw the fence, still behaved as though the fence was there.

In other words, the actual wall was gone, but a wall still stood in the minds and in the hearts of the deer.

[22 : 39] And what the gospel would say is that the same is true of us. Through Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross, the walls are gone. They've been eradicated.

There's no wall standing between us and God anymore. There need be no wall standing between us and one another anymore. But the walls still stand in our minds and in our hearts.

And this is why the gospel needs to be preached again and again and again because every time it is announced, walls come crashing down. James Boster was an anthropologist from the University of Connecticut.

He was not a Christian, but he spent time studying the various tribes of indigenous people in Ecuador. and these tribes warred constantly with one another in a kind of endless cycle of revenge killings.

So this tribe would attack this tribe and then this tribe would respond in kind and they would respond in kind and so war was a constant reality among these people groups. And their language actually had no word for something like peace.

[23 : 47] There was no word in their language for peace. And as a result of all of this, they were on the verge of self-extinction and that's why people had begun to take notice in them is because they were on the verge of being wiped out entirely from all of the killing.

So some Christian missionaries decades ago, including a man named Jim Elliott, went there to try to share the gospel with these people in the hopes that it would help. But through a very unfortunate series of misunderstandings, they were actually killed.

But then something really extraordinary happened. The wives of these missionaries who had been murdered, the wives returned to Ecuador. But they didn't return to seek revenge.

They returned to love and to serve these people. And in doing that, they began to show them a new way of being human.

A new humanity. not an endless cycle of retribution and revenge, but the way of forgiveness and reconciliation. In other words, they began to live as though the wall was gone.

[24 : 58] They lived like the gospel is actually true. And this actually opened these people up to the truth of the gospel because they saw the power that it had.

And when they were opened to the message of the gospel, that actually finally brought an end to generations of revenge killings. And if you look at those people groups today, they are steadily

recovering in number.

The dividing walls of hostility came crashing down. But there are still many walls. There are still many people out there, including many of us, who have walls that still stand in our hearts and minds.

And so the gospel needs to be preached. And this is why we celebrate Christmas like we do. Because every time we celebrate Christmas, we're reminded that the walls don't need to be there. And this is what makes Christmas such good news for people like me and you who long for peace. In a moment, we're going to stand and we're going to sing another song, a carol.

[26 : 02] And this is a carol that started out as a poem, actually, written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And Longfellow was a tragic story. He had already lost his wife.

She died and he had loved her passionately. He had taken years to win her. And then they were married and shared a number of years together and then she died.

And the Civil War was raging and his son had gone off to fight in the Civil War and his son got shot in battle and the bullet nicked his spine. And so Longfellow had to bring him home and to try to tend to his wounds and nurse him back to health.

And so in late December, Longfellow finds himself deeply tortured with grief over his wife. Deeply resenting and lamenting the wounds that his son had sustained.

And then looking around at this country that he loved and feeling as though the very fabric of the nation had been torn to pieces. because people were literally killing one another in their own homeland.

[27 : 11] And he felt hopeless despair. And then he heard bells ringing outside on Christmas morning. And something about those bells sparked hope in him.

And so he sat down and wrote a poem titled Christmas Bells. And that poem then became the song that we're about to sing.

So let's stand together, let's remember the Christmas hope, and let's celebrate the gospel of Jesus Christ.