



Heart of Peace

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado — Sunday, September 08, 2024

Romans 12:9-21: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty (that is arrogant), but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (NRSV)

Let us pray:

Oh God, whose love is beyond imagining,

Whose grace flows freely, never ceasing,

Whose mercy is deeper than the oceans, wider than the skies:

 Come now through the power of Your Holy Spirit and

 Fill our hearts with Your presence,

 Open our minds to Your truth,

 Guide our steps toward Your path of peace,

So that we may apply Your Word to our lives,

 Be transformed,

 And become living witnesses of your power to the world.

In Christ we pray.

Amen.

This month we are reflecting together on a series called "Matters of the Heart." As Rev. Mary Kate shared last week, as we prepare ourselves to celebrate our 70th Anniversary, we want to spend some time reflecting on who we are and who God continues to call us to become. So, each week this month, we are challenging ourselves to live out some heart-centered values like love, peace, service, and forgiveness.

Last week Rev. Mary Kate preached a powerful sermon on love. Love, not as a feeling that makes us feel tingly inside, but love as the divine reality that refuses to give up on us. Mary Kate pointed out that since God's very nature is love, God "refuses to give up on the hearts" of those created in the divine image and calls us to reflect that same reality outwardly. She reminded us time and time again that God is love, and we are loved not because of the things we do, think, or say, we are loved because God is love, and if we love, God abides in us.

We began the series by focusing on love, because love is the foundation that sustains and supports all other matters of the heart. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSVU). Because love is from God, God is love, and because we are loved, we are also empowered to love.

Today, we build on this concept, but visiting the Apostle Paul and his letter to the church in Rome, particularly, his call for us to express our love through **peace**.

After the Gospels and Acts, if I had one book of the Bible to recommend for your daily reading, the book would be Romans. This book of the New Testament offers context to all we may read in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and beyond that, the Book of Romans has a way of calling out all people of faith to a higher standard of being. If you can get through Romans and don't feel like the Apostle Paul has stepped on your toes in some way, you have either reached Christian perfection, or accidentally read a different book. Because in Romans Paul addresses the human condition and calls of us to realize our need for divine grace and forgiveness.

Here in our focus text for the day, Paul is building on the foundation of love, and calling us to genuinely express our love through the reality of peace. Peace, as in the absence of war or conflict, but peace as a condition of the heart allows us to relate to others in a genuine and incarnational way.

But let me tell you, I am old enough to know that peace is not always easy. We live in a culture that seems to insist on perfecting the art of hating others, and it can be hard to know how to cultivate peace in such a world. Yet, the Apostle Paul urges us to take a radically different

approach. He challenges us to make peace not just a lofty ideal, but a lived reality—one that begins in our hearts and flows outward into our relationships, our communities, and even our interactions with those we might consider enemies.

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Peace, as Paul describes it, is not passive. It is not the mere absence of conflict or a quiet tolerance of injustice. Peace, in the biblical sense, is active. It is rooted in the love of God and calls us to actively seek the good of others, even in the face of opposition. This is why Paul says, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” (Romans 12:17). We are called not to avoid conflict but to be peacemakers, which often requires us to overcome our instincts for retaliation and self-preservation.

Until a month or so ago, I had never given much thought to the distinction between peacekeeping and peacemaking. While sitting in a meeting with our new Bishop, David Graves, he spoke about this reality. He said he was called to be a peacemaker and not a peacekeeper. Curious about how he saw the distinction, I asked him to say more. He pointed out that peacekeepers often create surface-level peace, by seeking to please all people. Peacemakers on the other hand, lean into the discomfort and see differences as an opportunity for growth. The end goal for peacemaking is not superficial harmony, but a mission driven consensus that calls all parties to be transformed and move forward together.

The Apostle Paul knows this isn't easy. In fact, he acknowledges that sometimes peace may not be fully possible. He writes, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you” (Romans 12:18). Paul is a realist—as one who experienced a fair share of conflict, he knows there are times when peace may not be achievable due to the actions or hearts of others. But he places the responsibility squarely on us to do everything within our power to pursue peace, regardless of how others respond. This means that peace isn't contingent on external circumstances; it is a condition of the heart that we are called to cultivate, regardless of what is happening around us.

Jesus, as he prepared to ascend, told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27, NRSV). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus offered his

disciples (and us), something that they could gain for themselves, peace. Peace is not our work, it is God's work in us, through the power of Spirit. Therefore, our inability to leave in peace, has something to say about the state of our souls. For as the Apostle reminds us, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, **peace**, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23a).

So, what does that look like in practice? Paul gives us some very concrete examples about the internal reality of peace. He tells us: Bless those who persecute you. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Do not repay evil with evil. These aren't just platitudes; they are the markers of a life lived in alignment with God's peace. When we bless those who persecute us, we are embodying the radical love of Christ, refusing to allow hatred or bitterness to take root in our hearts. When we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, we are acknowledging the shared humanity we all possess, and we are choosing to enter into the joys and sorrows of others with empathy and love.

One of the most challenging aspects of this passage is Apostle's instruction to bless, rather than curse, those who persecute us. This goes against everything our culture teaches us about how to respond to conflict. Our world tells us to protect ourselves, to lash out when wronged, and to seek revenge. But our faith calls us to live as witnesses of the One whose act of love manifested as self sacrifice and death on a cross. He calls us to trust that God's justice is greater than our own. He says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God" (Romans 12:19). This doesn't mean we passively accept wrongdoing, but rather, we trust that God's justice will prevail, and we are freed to pursue peace instead of vengeance. Our world has seen its share of hatred and pain. What the world needs from us is a new way of living and being that lifts all of us up from the darkness of despair into the light of hope. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, in his writings reminds us that "Hate is just as injurious to the hater as it is to the hated."¹ He says, "Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Many of our inner conflicts are rooted in hate. This is why the psychiatrists say, 'Love or perish.' Hate is too great a burden to bear."²

¹ Carson, Clayborne. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (p. 332). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

The call to live peaceably is a call to live in a counter-cultural way. It is a call to reject the narratives of division, hatred, and fear that pervade our world and instead, embrace the way of Christ—a way marked by love, compassion, and reconciliation. And this call is not just for the easy moments of life; it's for the hard ones too. It's for the moments when peace seems impossible, when we are hurt, misunderstood, or wronged. It is in those moments that we are invited to trust in the God who is our peace and to embody that peace for others.

How can we be peacemakers in our everyday lives? What does it mean to bring peace into our families, our workplaces, our communities? How can we, like Christ, be instruments of God's peace in a world that desperately needs it?

One of the key challenges Paul gives us is to not be “overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). This is more than just advice—it is a way of life. Evil seeks to pull us into its grip, to make us respond with hatred, bitterness, or revenge. But as followers of Christ, we are called to resist this temptation. Instead, we are called to respond with goodness, to let our lives reflect the peace of Christ in every circumstance. And beloved, living this way may not always be easy, but it is what we are called to as people of faith. When we live with a heart of peace, we not only reflect the love of God to others, but we also become witnesses to the transforming power of the gospel. Our world is in desperate need of peacemakers—people who are willing to live differently, who are willing to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness, even when it is hard.

As you go into this new week, I invite you to reflect on what areas of your life might God be calling you to be a peacemaker. Where can you actively work toward peace, even when it seems impossible? Perhaps it's in a strained relationship, a conflict at work, or even in your own heart. Wherever it is, know that the peace of Christ is with you, empowering you to live out this radical call.

May we go forth from this place today, filled with God's love and peace, ready to be instruments of that peace in the world.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.