



“The Peace of the Christ”

You might be surprised to hear that many of the letters in the New Testament are attempts to deal with fighting in the early church – in the church! Imagine that- human beings not knowing how to get along. We seem to spend so much of our lives either defending or attacking, don't we? It might be with a spouse, a friend, a sibling or a complete stranger. We're on a hair-trigger ready to fire at the slightest provocation. Sometimes, we direct hostile thoughts toward ourselves; we treat our bodies poorly, judge ourselves harshly and do things to ourselves we wouldn't do to our worst enemies. Extend this to how tribes, religions, and nations have historically treated each other, and continue to do so, and we find ourselves smack dab in the quagmire of violence. You'd think the church might be exempt from such things. But alas, it seems that evolutionary wiring does not exempt the spiritually inclined. In fact, historically, religion has too often been used to justify violence.

That's why this 2000 year-old selection of a letter to an ancient community grabbed me. The author of the letter is trying to help the Ephesians deal with hostilities between two factions. Both groups called themselves Christians, but one community were Jewish Christians and

the other, the Ephesians, were Gentiles Christians. The Jewish Christians thought the Gentiles should become Jews – eat kosher food, be circumcised, and observe the traditional festivals. The author of the letter disagrees. I'm interested the theology he employs to help the Ephesians hold fast to their new identity, and to do it peacefully.

I hope you're not frightened by me bringing up theology in a sermon. By “theology” I simply mean spiritual logic – thinking about our lives and historical events, from the perspective of what we think we know about God. So, when Christians get around to doing this kind of thinking, one of our primary ways to do it is from the particular perspective of what we learn about God through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Now, it's a complicated business theology, because as I point out in my book, there are different levels of consciousness, or different worldviews containing different assumptions, core values, and beliefs, all leading to different ways of interpreting the life of Jesus. Each level produces its own distinctive theology.

But one thing is crystal clear: violence and hostility show up across all worldviews. They show up differently, but they show up. The

writer of this section of the letter is reminding them that Jesus was all about bringing peace to the world, so their continued haggling was actually unfaithful to the covenant. The writer is making the case that making peace was the epicenter of what Jesus was doing. Outsiders may look at the crucifixion and conclude that it represents a triumph of violence – it was an execution by the Roman State. And that's true from one perspective. But from the writer's point of view, it was a lot more than that. It was God's way of transforming violence into suffering and reconciling divisiveness into unity.

He's saying that on the cross Jesus reached out across the chasm that existed between these two hostile camps of Christians, grabbed them by the scruff of the neck and pulled them both toward his broken heart. The cross was God's way of saying, in Jesus of Nazareth, you people are breaking my heart. Look at what you are doing to me. You are taking my dream of unity and tearing it asunder. But in Christ, God chooses to take the pain into Godself, and in God's heart it undergoes an alchemy of transformation.

Jesus was, according to the writer, reconciling "both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (2:16). What died on the cross was hostility. That's quite a claim. But, we may rightly protest, clearly hostility still exists, so what's the deal? Here's the thing that Paul, the apostle, assumed but which we sometimes

miss. The crucifixion is not simply an historical event. It's a dynamic psychological and spiritual practice that we are meant to undergo ourselves. This Christian life isn't about believing stuff that was said about Jesus 2000 years ago. It's about trying it out and taking it for a ride. See if it actually works. In other words, if you want to experience new life in Christ, don't just talk about the crucifixion as a historical event, try dying with Christ. Try doing what Christ did. Death and resurrection are reenacted in our own lives as a spiritual practice.

So, let's bring it back down to earth. How do we put an end to hostility in our own lives? (We'll never be free from conflict, but we can be free from hostility). First, ask yourself, are you really committed to peace? The writer of Ephesians says that Jesus was all about birthing a new humanity, through the practice of peace. Are you in? Have you made a decision that you will practice peace in order to be part of this Jesus movement to birth a new human species – pax humanis – the peaceful human? Or deep down, are you getting something out of your arguments? Do you love the drama of being right at all costs? Do you secretly enjoy fighting? Are you really ready to let go of the practice of hostility and learn how to listen when everything inside you just wants to lash out? You see, Jesus got clear about this, and with that clarity he started a movement of those who were tired of the old humanity, who wanted to participate in the evolution of the species.

In Christ, God does not choose

to avoid the suffering, or rise above it, or zap the enemy. All of these would represent coercive attempts to deal with hostility. First, God's takes the suffering into God's own heart. And to be in Christ, is to first of all feel, with God, the pain of separation – the pain of how we treat each other as a species, the pain of how we've treated others and we've been treated. Open your heart to all of that. Stay with that pain when everything in you wants to attack, hurt the other, or hurt ourselves.

Recently, my daughter Sarah came to visit me from LA. It was a wonderful visit: deep connection, great talks, walks in the forest and by the sea; good food. But it almost didn't happen at all. At the last moment Sarah changed her ticket, letting me know in an email. The way the email read, our visit was going to be shortened to one day. I was disappointed and let her know. In fact, I suggested that a one-day visit was not worth the money for the airline ticket. Sarah responded with an angry email. I, in turn, crafted a devastating, logical, and definitive email, which indicated beyond a doubt that I was right and she was wrong. (Very mature.) Then I took a deep breath, and put it in my draft folder, and went for a walk. I watched my little, hurt self as it formulated killer arguments to justify my position.

But then as I walked by the sea, I underwent a kind of crucifixion. My heart, I realized, was broken. Our whole history of disappointments, from both sides, came flooding in. Anger surged, then was replaced by

and deep and abiding love. Sadness ensued. Hopelessness followed. Then love returned like the rising tide I was walking beside. But my ego wasn't quite finished yet. It reasserted itself with fierce resolve. I watched this drama rise up inside of me, and then resolve, over and over again. I knew, just a little bit, what the writer of Ephesians was talking about when he wrote that on the cross Christ took hostilities into his own body, in order that the two could be one.

So, once you've made the basic decision that you want to participate in the birth of a new humanity and stop the violence, here's the practice: learn to take the hurt into your own body and heart, like Jesus. When everything in you wants to act out your anger, instead take it inside – into your own body and heart and feel it first. Go to the cross, watch the hostility, rather than act out on it. Then allow your hostility to die in the crucible of your heart of hearts, because that is where the Christ dwells.

Sarah, for her part, must have gone through a similar process. When I got home another email awaited me. She said that she needed to see me and she was coming. No justification, no arguments, no attacks – just, I felt, the promptings of love that had caused her to take it into her own body and soul and suffer it all, rather than perpetuate it.

(As it turned out, the original email that set the whole thing off was unintentionally mistaken in its timelines. Our visit was only to be delayed by hours, not two days.) But

we had both chosen to undergo, in the language of Christian spirituality, a crucifixion of our small, defensive selves that will sacrifice love in order to be right.

On the cross, the writer determines, Christ abolished all that keeps the division and hostilities in place, “that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (2:15).

Is it too grandiose to suggest that if made it a practice to “go to the cross” with Christ, to find that vulnerable place within our body and mind rather than attack, that a new humanity might emerge? I don’t know. I think it’s a divine prescription that we yet to comply with as a species. This much I do know, that whenever I have followed this prescription, by the grace of God, something new and rare is born. Whenever I help couples to suspend their self-justification and their defensiveness, and simply be

together with two broken hearts reaching out across the pain, something new is born – human beings with the heart of Christ.

Take whatever that is which is born from the cross – take that Easter self – and build a new Temple, says the writer of Ephesians. Build a habitat wherein the mighty, vulnerable God of our mothers and fathers might dwell. Build yourselves a congregation that is a habitat for the emergence of a new humanity – a vulnerable, resilient, peace-loving and just community willing to die with Christ so that Christ may be raised up again and again. Build yourselves a Temple to peace on the strong foundation of Christ’s broken, reconciling heart. We’re currently recruiting builders. As you come forward this morning to receive the bread and the cup, receive also the heart of Christ; receive the grace to sign up for this movement for a new humanity.