

“Be Peacemakers” **Matthew 5:9 July 11, 2010**

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

I remember the first time I ever tried to preach on peacemaking. We were living next to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. I was pastor of a country church during seminary and Beverly taught in the military schools. Ft. Knox is not only the home of the 4,500 tons of U.S. Gold Bullion Reserve, but also the home of the U.S. Army’s Armor Training Center and its 25,000 soldiers and family members. Our country church was surrounded by the U.S. Cavalry! Tanks and target practice were daily sights and sounds.

The first time I tried to prepare a sermon on peace I was in my little church office, thinking about peacemaking to the accompaniment of tank canon explosions. My office windows were rattling, and the profound irony and reality of that moment shook me up. Never have I felt more idealistic as a preacher than in that moment.

In March, I had a similar experience. While attending the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia meeting in First Baptist Church, Virginia Beach, Brian McLaren was speaking on a videocast about peacemaking. As he spoke, Navy jets from the nearby Naval Air Station flew over, almost drowning him out. This week I had another such experience. I wrote this sermon in my study at home, surrounded by folded American flags, semaphore flags and other military mementos from my grandfather, who served in World War One, and my father, mother, and father-in-law, who served in World War Two.

How do you preach peace in a world at war? How do you preach peace in a world of Abrams tanks, smart bombs, nuclear warheads and their potential “megacorpuses?” How do you preach peace in a world of Al Qaida, the Taliban, murderous despots and spies? How do you preach peace in a world of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia? How do you preach peace in a world of ethnic cleansing and veiled women blowing up themselves and innocent women and children in the name of God? How do you preach peace when the Church is so divided? I don’t want to be a false prophet, like the ones Jeremiah condemned: *They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (6¹⁴).*

In our ironic, strife-filled, dangerous world, all of us are trying to find peace, aren’t we? The world really is a puzzle with a *peace* missing. And we are all looking for that missing peace. Whether in a pastor’s study, preparing your sermon, or in an Army tank, practicing your artillery. A World War I American soldier from the backwoods was constantly receiving negative letters from his wife. She complained about everything: food shortages, problems on the farm, frustration with his absence. The soldier’s dangerous life was all the more problematic because of his wife’s letters, so he finally wrote her back: “Woman, I want no more of your letters. Please let me fight this here war in peace!”

Few people know like most soldiers know the desperate need for heeding Jesus’ call to peacemaking. The “soldier’s general,” World War II General Omar Bradley, gave one of the strongest calls ever for biblical peacemaking when he said: “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

Back to my rattling old Kentucky home. My church, Rock Haven Baptist, had a split ten years before I came. A new building was built out on the highway, and when we moved, some decided to stay and form a new church at the old building. This was not very much fun in that small place, especially when the “stayers” wrongly named themselves “First Rock Haven Baptist Church.” We were the original church, but they had the original building. The fracture deepened in our country community.

Everywhere I visited, the prospects wanted to know which “Rock Haven Church” I was from. There weren’t enough people to support two Baptist churches less than a mile apart. And it was a terrible, seemingly irreconcilable witness. The pastor of the other church and I became friends and began to ride back and forth to seminary together. We began to pray and plot together. We took some peacemaking initiatives. The two congregations began to do some things together and to talk about our problems. Eventually the unheard of happened: a split church reunited as one, and is reconciled to this day. Peacemaking came to Rock Haven!

I learned some things about peacemaking in my old Kentucky home, in the shadow of Fort Knox. And I think these lessons apply to peacemaking in the family, in the church and between nations.

First, peacemaking is divine work. I do not know that I have ever felt more a part of the work of God than I did in the process of these two churches reconciling. This seventh Beatitude uses the same verb that is used for Christ making peace through the blood of the cross. Ephesians 2 says: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he . . . has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . . thus making peace, . . . he came and proclaimed peace (2:13).* To make peace is to participate in the very work of God, the very work of God’s only begotten Son, the very work of the cross. No wonder peacemakers are called children of God. For peacemaking is divine work!

Secondly, participating in this divine work of peacemaking is not so much about inner peace as about reconciliation at all levels of human engagement. It was not good enough in Rock Haven to find a place of inner contentment and ignore for another decade the major fracture in our small community. The term, “peacemaking” that Jesus uses in this Beatitude is a more political term than we might realize. It was primarily used of Roman emperors and generals, but Jesus hands it over to us.

Christian peacemaking cannot stop with peace in my heart and your heart. Christian peacemaking must make peace in the church and peace in the community. We must make peace between the races and the classes and the nations. Christian peacemaking must go to the heart of every tension-torn territory on God’s fractured world. The peace in my heart must

flow to Rock Haven and to the uttermost parts of the world! For peacemaking is about reconciliation at all levels of human engagement!

And thirdly, we are called to peacemaking, not peacekeeping. This Beatitude is a call to wage peace, more than we wage war. Making peace in Rock Haven wasn't easy. In fact, it was some of the hardest work I have ever done. People got mad in the midst of making peace. Misinformation was put out by opponents, even in the newspaper. Everyone did not reconcile. The same people who led the split ten years before would still not make peace. They even tried, to no avail, to start another, other church.

One of the greatest challenges of peacemaking is to not let what is best for the whole be demolished by the irreconcilable will of a few. There really are people who are enemies of peace. And Edmund Burke was right when he allegedly said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." Good people must do a lot of hard work, a lot of heavy lifting, to make peace!

Certainly we are to love peace and to hold onto peace when we find it, but we are to do more than that. We are to make transforming initiatives that bring the Shalom of the Kingdom of God more on earth as it is in heaven. We must pray for peace and work for peace. Give presents to a prisoner's children this Christmas. Adopt a deployed soldier and her or his family and write them. Help a single mom find a better job. Let our politicians know your convictions on the hot issues of our day. Work to alleviate poverty in the greater Richmond area. Get to know a neighbor of another religion. Give and go in the cause of world missions. Make peace, don't just keep it or love it. Initiate. And don't let a few trouble-makers stand in the way of this great work of God. Don't let an irreconcilable older brother keep you out of the Father's house and the party He has planned!

We had a wonderful party – a service of reconciliation – when Rock Haven Baptist Church and First Baptist Church of Rock Haven merged to become Rock Haven Community Baptist Church. Almost everyone in the community was there, but a few did not show up. They stayed out in the field and complained about the party. And you know, I think they are still out there!

It is an ironic world to which we are called to be peacemakers. There are enemies of peace who will not come to the party, and will even try to destroy the party. But this is the Father's party! And His Kingdom is coming to earth as it is in heaven! A glorious, peaceful Kingdom where the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the baby and the snake and the prodigal son, the elder brother and the reconciling Father will live together in peace! *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, the Father says, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:9).

Yes, peacemaking is the Father's hard, reconciling work! Not everyone came to the Rock Haven reconciliation party. But I tell you, the Father was there! And you could almost hear the Father's voice booming from heaven as He did at Jesus' baptism: "*These are my beloved sons and daughters in whom I am well pleased.*" For, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*"

May we pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon:
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy
O divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.