

Built Together

Psalm 85; Ephesians 2:11-22

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First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

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World Communion Sunday

The church's membership hovered just around seventy and the average age of those members was pretty close to seventy as well. Among the faithful were veterans, quite a few given the size of the congregation and the Session wanted to recognize them with a worship service in the "tabernacle," a large concrete slab with a strong metal roof set beside the cemetery, followed by a covered dish lunch. We were mindful that some of our WWII veterans were getting well up in years and the opportunity to honor them limited. A few elders took the lead, and the plan was up and running.

The tabernacle would have the normal rectangle folding tables in the middle for food and eating. There would be the chairs in rows for worship. But for this event there would also be tables around the perimeter of the space, one dedicated to each of our veterans, adorned with red, white and blue cloth where mementos from their days in the military could be placed. The elders in charge went on visits to collect the memorabilia so that it could be set up in advance of the service. I was paired with one of my favorite elders. (I know we're not supposed to have favorites, but sometimes you just can't help it.) We went on a few pleasant visits and gathered up photos, official documents, uniforms, metals, dog tags. We heard stories of courage, comradery and some nostalgia for more youthful, illness free days.

Then we went to Mr. Thompson's house, our oldest veteran. His hearing was poor, in large part due to his military service. Too many explosions, in too close proximity. Before we went my elder partner reminded me that Mr. Thompson had seen brutal combat in WWII. There were stories of how he would sometimes leave his home, terrified, re-living what he'd seen years after the war had ended. He'd suffered mightily from what my elder labeled "shell shock." I knew Mr. Thompson to be a kind, affable man. Always in worship regardless of how little of it he likely heard. We banged on the door and eventually were let into his living room. He knew why we'd come having been given notice of the festivities and our visit.

At first, our time together went like all the others. The picture of the young man, looking fit and sharp in his uniform. The story of basic training, deployment, fear and, yes, excitement. Group photos where friends were pointed out, comments about who didn't make it home. We were standing, thanking him, about to leave when he asked us to wait a minute. "I have one more thing to show you," he said.

He left and we heard him rustling through a closet. He returned with a small black and white photo. He passed it us with these words: “This is what war is *really* like.” The image is seared in my brain. A young soldier stands in the foreground and just behind him a pyramid of human remains towers above him. The three of us were silent. Then Mr. Thompson said, “We can’t forget this is what war is *really* like.” He reached out his hand to take back the photo and added, “You can’t put this on the table. There will be children there, but we need to remember what war does to people.”

As one who knew all too well what war did to people, he refused to let us forget the real human cost, the destruction that comes when divisions among us turn violent. That haunting photo and his heart-felt words revealed the truth that the Spirit’s gift of peace is a matter of life and death, for all of us. To forget this is to reduce peace to only an inner feeling of contentment and neglect the will of our God for all creation to know real-life shalom.

Ephesians tells us: Jesus is our peace. Jesus is making peace. Jesus proclaimed peace. Those who were far off from God, from one another, are brought near. The walls erected, protected, defended and fortified, are dismantled and rearranged into one human household, a dwelling place for God. The radical renovation of hearts and minds, neighborhoods and alliances, tribes and nations, is complete and world encompassing. The arms of Christ on the cross enfold all of creation, offering the peace that transforms strangers into siblings, calling us to be blessed peacemakers who recognize we are all children of God. The brutality of the crucifixion reveals the cost of this reconstruction, the price God was willing to pay to be at peace with us and for us to be at peace with each other.

The peace of Christ is more than the absence of violence, but it must begin there. The peace of Christ is God’s shalom, an all-encompassing wholeness that enables human beings to flourish and communities to thrive, a power that brings people together, builds up all that is good, and dismantles all that hurts or injures on God’s holy mountain. The vision of such a world seems unfathomable and yet it is exactly the picture that is painted for us throughout scripture. In Genesis: everything called very good. And in Deuteronomy: If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. And Isaiah: The wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. And in Jeremiah: They will build houses and dwell in them, they will plant vineyards and eat their fruits. And in Matthew: Just as you’ve done it to the least of these, you’ve done it to me. And in Ephesians: Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving. And in Revelation: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. And in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: Good news of great joy for all people, grace upon grace, the Lord’s favor, the salvation of the world. It would

appear that God really intends shalom for all creation, not just when every tribe and nation are gathered around the lamb on the throne, but now in the present when Jews and Gentiles sit around the same table, when everyone has enough to eat, when no child walks their neighborhood in fear and each person knows they have someone to call in the middle of the night.

God intends and sends shalom. Jesus is our peace. Jesus is making peace. Jesus proclaimed peace. Jesus tore down the dividing walls between us. Jesus made us into one humanity, living in the same household, a dwelling place for God, building us together so that everyone can flourish.

Professor Kathryn Harden writes that society shouldn't be structured "as a race we all compete in" but instead should be seen as "a building we all have to live in. A building built for our full and equal enjoyment. A building where we are joint-owners. A building we build for each other."

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we would add, a building built together by and for God.

This is an expansive vision, hard for us to imagine, but possible, inevitable, because Jesus is our peace. Jesus is making peace. Jesus proclaimed peace and through the power of the Spirit we not only receive the gift of peace, we proclaim it, make it, work toward it, and become it, too.

Last week Grant took food to a mother in the housing community he serves. He'd met the woman on Monday and on Wednesday got word that her son had been shot. Sadly, such incidents are all too common in this neighborhood. They were frequent in the neighborhoods he served in Charlottesville and the ones in Newport News, too. In his role in Charlottesville, he would get a phone call, letting him know the details, if the perpetrator was in custody, how many people involved, how old the victims, if they survived and if they had lived, their condition. The calls were painful but became tragically routine. This time, though, he was compelled to go see the young man's mother, take something, even if it felt like a very small offering. I think it was because in her face he could picture the horrific impact of that news, he could see what violence really looks like and he could not turn away. He said, "It felt a lot closer this time." It's almost like we were in the same household.

And, through Christ, we are. Built together, a dwelling place for God, so close we cannot help but rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, in the same building where we receive and share and proclaim and embody the gift of peace, until everyone knows what God's shalom is really like.