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**Lent 1 A, Feb. 26, 2023**

**Liturgy 6: "Fighting With My Husband – Passing the Peace and the Everyday Work of Shalom"**

**Read: Matthew 5: 21 – 26 and or Memorize Matt: 5: 23 - 24**

Suppose tomorrow morning, you heard that Ontario County was invaded by a foreign country, an enemy that whisked 10,000 of our residents and resettled them in their country. And they didn't just take any random 10,000 people. They took the cream of our county, our future hopes and dreams. How would you feel?

How do you think they would feel? They are now in a foreign country. They don't speak the language and have no idea of when they will return. They write back and their letter gets to some guy who thinks he speaks for God. He got the letter because they want to understand what God is doing!

Now this yo-yo is well known. He has been a real problem to the government for years. He points out their errors, especially when they don't care for the poor and exercise their responsibilities incorrectly. He writes back, saying he's got a message from God Himself: "Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace, you will find your peace."

Can you imagine how angry would make them? They don't want to seek the peace of anything. They want us to launch an attack on this country. We are Ontario County, one of the leading counties in New York State. We are proud of our hometown and our community.

Unfortunately, they will find themselves spending the next seventy years in exile. The prophet tells them they should have their sons and daughters marry and their children's children marry, which apparently, they do. Because seventy years later when they return to Jerusalem, over 42,000 people come back. Others choose to stay behind because life in Babylon had become comfortable and prosperous.

We're talking about peace today. Personally, I would like to keep this discussion on the level of world peace. It's a lot easier to talk about that than to talk about the

peace in my own home, congregation and community. You see global peace is just so big that there is not much I can do about it. On the other hand, peace in my home is very intimate to me and I share responsibility for it.

We all have patterns, ways we act and react that reveal our brokenness and sins. If you put two people in a room for any period of time, give them enough time to be themselves, they are likely to rub each other the wrong way. Sometimes, we just ignore the person and plan never to be with them again. Of course, that is not peace.

The word we're using, peace is a translation of a Hebrew word "shalom," which as Pastor Warren reminds us is, "a very pregnant word that means God's all-consuming, all-redeeming peace. The hope of a kingdom where God is worshiped wholly, where humanity extends love and mercy with generosity, where systematic injustice is broken and 'the oppressed are set free' was (and is) inconceivably beautiful and intoxicating." It sounds too good to be true. Unfortunately, it is not true among us. We are humans and inclined to do everything possible to not be at peace.

Oddly enough, we tend to behave better with those we don't know very well than with those we love. With the former we fear that if we act up, they'll put us in our place. On the other hand, with those we love, we know that they will love us despite our shortcomings.

It is often easier to love our neighbor than to love the members of our family, who get on our nerves; do the same things that aggravate us all the time. Of course, they often feel the same way about us, while still loving us.

As Pastor Warren reminds us, "We like to think in the global terms of the big ideas of justice and truth and neglect the small opportunities around us to extend kindness, forgiveness and grace. The reason for that is quite simple, when we're talking about those big ideas, we are talking about situations in which we will rarely be. We are reminded that God's peace and mission must begin where he has placed us.

There is an ancient custom in the church, which many abhor. Thom Rainer, a noted Christian researcher, did a survey of things guests hate at worship. The number one item that guests said they don't like is the passing of the peace. I know that it

is not just guests who don't like it. I've heard that it's awkward, inauthentic and feels forced to share this greeting with others.

On the other side, the passing of the peace can become a pretty informal time to chat with a friend about where the good fishing is and how the last vacation went, which is really not the way God wants us to use it. But perhaps worst of all, one of the reasons first time guests hate it, is because they are often ignored as people carry on conversations in the aisle and they sit with no one talking to them.

It's not a very nice picture to draw? I confess that I am a passer of the peace. It is a symbol of something that is vital to each one of us. We have shared the passing of the peace right after the confession and absolution. In the absolution we hear that we are reconciled to God and are now sent to each other to be reconciled to each other.

Here's a dilemma. The person I should be reconciled with is the person I don't want to be reconciled to. That is exactly how sin separates us from each other. Our pride and ego lead us astray.

Others are concerned with the sanitariness of it. I guess it is a bit odd if you shake hands; then spray sanitizer right after. It might give them the wrong impression. Of course, if we follow the Jewish tradition it might be even more uncomfortable. They share the kiss of peace, not just a handshake.

Perhaps, we as pastors, have failed to explain the significance of this small gesture which is meant to begin the process of reconciling us to each other. I'd love to say we don't need it, but we do. At least I know I do. I am sure there are times when I have judged people poorly, which is a reflection of my own fears. That often is what causes us to judge others. Or perhaps, it is time for us to think creatively about ways that we can create authentic community, which is what the peace is meant to do.

The passing of the peace is really about living in community as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It can and should happen in our daily life, in "small, unseen moments as we live together, seeking to love those people who are the constants, the furniture in our lives – parents, spouses, kids, friends, enemies, the barista we chat with each week as we wait for our coffee, and the people in the pew behind us with the noisy toddler, the old man next door who doesn't get out much."

It is in these places, with these people, that we really get the opportunity to impact the world because this is where world peace can begin. If we can just find a way to live in peace with those around us, we will find an interesting thing happens.

As we share that peace and kindness that God gives us with others, it can become a movement, to change their lives. Isn't that exactly what Jesus did and what He sent His disciples to do? To bring the Kingdom of God to all they met?

One of the ways to bring peace to our community is to stop judging people, especially those who aren't Christians. When we point out the ways they are failing to live as Christians we're being hypocritical. They are not Christians, so why should we expect them to live as Christians. Whether we speak that judgement or just think it, it impacts the way we relate to them. They will might feel the hostility, which certainly does not send a message of peace.

Jesus said He came for all people, even those who are different than us. It's hard to engage in a conversation, develop a relationship or a friendship if we have already judged the person. And here's the double bind when we do that: Jesus says He will use the same measure to judge us.

"Finally, we want to remember that we are broken people, in a broken world, because of that, seeking shalom always involves forgiveness and reconciliation." It is the ultimate gift we give ourselves and share with others. When in a family we have those tiffs, it impacts them. When in a church we have those tiffs, it impacts us.

As Tish says, "One thing we want to remember, we are not the peacemakers, God is." He sent Jesus among us to create that peace. It did not come cheaply. We cannot bring it with our own strength. As she reminds us, "If we are ever peacemakers, it is not without a good deal of war within our hearts."

Yet, ultimately, we are reminded of the truth that she shares with us: "It takes faith to believe that God is making us into His people – slowly, through repentance – who are capable of saying to the world through our lives, 'Peace of Christ to you.'" Jesus calls us to share His peace with a world that is so broken that we find it easy to hurt each other. Perhaps, if we would be more intentional about sharing peace, we would not have to comfort one another so often at the death of people by violence.