



PEACE

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2008 marks the 50th anniversary of the peace symbol. Have you ever looked at it and tried to figure out how the lines relate to peace? In 1958, a man named Gerald Holtrom was asked to create a logo to represent peace for a nuclear protest in Britain. He looked at how Navy ships used flags to communicate. The letter N is two arms pointing out and down. The letter D is one arm straight up and one straight down. He superimposed the N over the D for “nuclear disarmament”, drew a circle around it, and the peace symbol was born.

Ironically, that symbol for peace became associated with controversy and violence and anger. There was nothing peaceful about it. For people who remember the 60s and 70s, it’s an emotionally charged symbol. It was picked up by civil rights demonstrators and anti-war protestors and all kinds of other movements. The South African government went so far as to try and ban it completely, because in that country it came to represent the anti-apartheid forces. Even on a smaller scale it has been controversial. As recently as 2006, a couple from Pagosa Springs, Colorado had a Christmas wreath on their house in the shape of the peace symbol and their Homeowners’ Association objected, threatening to fine them \$25 a day until they took it down. One association board member said he thought it was linked to the devil. That sparked a worldwide media frenzy and the board members resigned.

Who knew that what was intended to represent the concept of peace could cause such strong negative reactions? The symbol took on secondary meanings that overshadowed the original concept. And fifty years later, as memorable as the symbol is, we’re no closer to getting rid of nuclear bombs or wars than we were when it was introduced. Peace seems to be just about as elusive in this world as joy.

As you know by now, we are making our way through the fruit of the Spirit this fall, and since we’re going in word order with the text, peace is next in line. Let’s take a quick refresher look at what Paul said about the fruit in Galatians:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

We used to raise rabbits when I was growing up, and all the stereotypes about rabbits multiplying quickly are true. There were baby bunnies being born left and right. And the thing about rabbits is that they don't just have one or two babies at a time – they have these big litters with more bunnies than you can keep track of.

But in each litter, it seemed like there was always a runt – one bunny that was significantly smaller than the rest, the last one to get fed, the least coordinated and slowest grower. I always like the underdog, so I would always pull for the runts to get in there and thrive.

To me, peace feels a bit like the runt of the fruit of the Spirit. Put peace in a cluster with love and joy and it's the ugly stepsister of the bunch, the one that gets the least attention. Be honest: How many of you got really excited when you saw that the topic for today would be peace? Probably not our idea of the most sensational subject to cover.

Let's think for a minute of the images we have in our head of peace:

Flower Children

This is where we go with the peace symbol. Peace movements. Fringe groups smoking something illegal and feeling mellow. Kind of kooky and not mainstream. OR

Miss Cliche

When Miss America contestants are asked what they most want in life, what's the stereotypical answer? "World peace." We don't see peace as a word that has any effect. It's just a sweet sounding idea. But it doesn't stop any wars.

There's a U2 song that says, "You hear it every Christmastime, but hope and history won't rhyme, so what's it worth, this 'peace on earth?'" Peace has become a concept with no teeth. OR

Sleepytime

Another vision of peace is when your eyes are closed and you're dreaming for an uninterrupted 8 hours. Calm, relaxing. Complete non-activity. Peace is when there's not much going on. Which makes it seem unrelated to real life with its carpools and bailouts and hurricanes. Peace is a dream we can't identify with. OR

Old World Weaklings

Amish people are pacifists. They're kind of quaint. They don't really get what it's like to live in modern society. I actually heard a pastor say in a sermon one time that pacifists are wimps. We think of peace as weakness or something for a bygone era.

If those represent our view of peace, no wonder we don't get excited to think about it. But those are poor caricatures of the true meaning of the word. Jesus had something much different in mind.

John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

His peace doesn't look like what the world calls peace. Much different images come to mind as you read through the Bible. Strong, powerful pictures that put some meat on the bones of peace.

In the Bible, you find a peace that's a wrecking ball. It smashes down the barriers between people and God. Paul says Jesus has broken down every wall and given us peace.

You could also think of peace as welding iron that forms strong bonds where there were none.

Ephesians 4:3

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

God's peace brings people together in a profound way that other causes can't.

You could also think of peace as a forklift. It's the heavy machinery that lightens your burden when you are overwhelmed by the weight of life. There's a calmness that comes from letting God carry the load.

One more image: Think of peace as being your armored car. The kind of peace Jesus is offering is so strong it can protect you wherever you go. That's why many people's favorite verse is Philippians 4:7:

Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Now those are some images of peace you can grab on to. It's peace on steroids, peace with power and life to it. Great pictures. So how do we get more of it? When life is stress and tension headaches and credit card debt and a fight with your spouse, how do you find peace that's more than just a nice idea?

There's a story in John about when Jesus first appeared to his disciples after he rose from the dead. I've always just read it as being his way of letting them know he was alive. But as I looked at it again with peace in mind, I was amazed at what I found. And I think it sheds light on the question of finding peace today.

John 20:19-28

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

What caught my eye first was how Jesus repeated the line "Peace be with you" three times in the span of a few verses. We have very few instances in the Bible where Christ repeated himself like that. Mostly it makes me think of Peter. Three times, Jesus said to him, "Do you love me? If you love me, feed my sheep" Apparently, it was an important concept to Jesus and one that Peter was having a hard time wrapping his mind around.

So when Jesus purposely tells his disciples "Peace be with you" three times, I have to believe he's getting at something that's either important or hard for us to grasp, or both.

The disciples had every reason not to feel peace. They are the picture of un-peace. Imagine watching the nightmare of Jesus being tried and beaten and executed. The hatred of the crowd and the religious leaders was so intense. And now, the same people who plotted Jesus' death think you stole his body. They're going to come for you. You're next on the list. No wonder the disciples were so terrified.

Fear is a great peace killer. I was talking to someone last week who was feeling real fear of where the economy is at and his job. He had woken up with a panic attack just thinking about it, and nothing has even happened yet. Half the time, that's how fear is. Just like the disciples were afraid of what MIGHT happen, we can be full of fear over potential bad things, and that robs us of peace here and now.

At the same time they were afraid, the disciples were feeling the weight of an uncertain future. Jesus had shaped their lives for the past three years. The cause that had motivated them had now come to a screeching halt. They could feel a **pressure** bearing down on them to rethink everything they thought life was about.

Back in the 1800s, the U.S. War Department had all these miscellaneous medical files dating back to the Revolutionary War. In 1887 they decided to transfer all that

information to index cards. So they had hundreds of clerks meticulously transcribing the data and they were housing it all in Ford's Theater, the same theater where Lincoln had been shot. About 6 years into the project, three floors of the building collapsed under the weight of 30 million index cards.

Sometimes the weight of everything we're carrying is too much and it flattens us. We just want to collapse under the pressure and any thought of peace is crushed out of us.

And can you imagine the **anger** the disciples were feeling? Anger at Judas for his betrayal. Anger over the mockery of justice their legal system had been. Anger toward the religious leaders. Anger with themselves for not being more loyal in the heat of the moment.

Even amongst themselves, there wasn't peace. There was **conflict**. Most of the disciples had seen Jesus, but not Thomas. And as much as they were on the same team, Thomas refused to believe the others. How long had they been together? What's his problem?

For Thomas, the conflict was the result of a deeper problem: **doubt**. He was troubled by a strong suspicion that this whole thing was a hoax. He needed evidence to change his mind, and until then, he couldn't settle. Doubts leave little room for peace in your heart.

I'm sure there are other causes for un-peace, but that list is pretty universal. We all grapple with fear, we all feel pressure, we all get angry, we all find ourselves in conflict and we all have moments of doubt.

And what did the disciples do? They shut the door and locked themselves in. They put a wall between themselves and their fears and hunkered down.

Our kids' schools generally have one or two lockdowns a year. If a criminal is on the loose in the area, schools will lock the doors, close all the blinds turn, off the lights and have all the kids sit on the floor. The goal is to keep the criminal out. But it also keeps the kids in. Parents are called and told, "Do NOT come to the school. You will not be allowed to pick up your child until after this is over."

As the disciples shut that door, they were keeping out their problems, but they were also trapping themselves inside. They were unable to move.

We all react to problems that way. We wall ourselves off, throw barriers between ourselves and other people. It feels safer. But it also traps us in a place we can't get out of. We find ourselves locked down and paralyzed by fear. We paint ourselves into a corner with anger. We isolate ourselves in an attempt to avoid conflict. We shut ourselves off from exploring faith because of our doubts.

The door is locked and we're trapped inside. But praise God Jesus doesn't need a door! He just showed up right in the middle of their gathering, uninvited, unexpected. And no

matter how far we have cocooned ourselves in our own problems, Christ still shows up. And he offers us a way out.

Jesus does two simple things in that meeting: He speaks words of peace. Then he shows his hands. It's beautiful: words and action, verbal and physical. In that moment, he completely personifies peace.

First there were the words. Peace be with you. Then he added, "*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*" That's not what you would expect to relieve their anxiety. Have peace – I'm flinging the door open and pushing you through it. Have peace – I'm putting you back out on the dangerous streets of Jerusalem. I'm not letting you hide – I'm sending you.

He said his peace wasn't like the world's, and he wasn't kidding. **In the face of fear, Christ gives a mission of love.** Contrary to our instincts, the key to peace is not isolation. The disciples are given an assignment that will make them face their fears and move beyond them. They have a new identity as commissioned by the Lord himself. And just like the Father sent Jesus because of his love, Christ turns around and sends us out into the world to love people.

A speaker named Rob Parsons from the U.K. was on the radio this week. There's a church in England that has grown by leaps and bounds, and in that church was a man who was a hair dresser. One of his customers was a young woman named Nicki who was a stripper at a local club who came in to get her hair done. One day she asked him, "How come you don't try to sleep with me like all the other men?" He said, "I have different values."

She said, "I bet you go to church." And when he said he did, she said, "I'd like to go there with you." But he didn't want to bring her to his church. It was a happy, respectable little family church. He knew what she'd wear when she came. And she did. She came straight from working at the club, and all these wives put their hands over their husbands' eyes as she walked right up to the front row.

She ended up accepting Christ that very day. After the service the pastor gave her a Bible, and Wednesday of that week, he got a call. It was the stripper. She said, "Thanks for the Bible. Pastor do you read the Bible? Have you ever read that Corinthians book?"

He said, "Yes, Nicki, I have." She said, "Did you know it says in that book that our bodies are the temple of God? If that's true, I need to quit my job." And that Friday, she went to the club and did just that.

When she got baptized six weeks later, five other strippers and four bouncers came. And they all came straight from the club. At this point wives were putting plastic bags over their husbands' heads. Several of those men and women came to Christ that night. On the Monday morning after, the pastor gets a knock on the door.

It's an older woman from his church. She was all in knots. She said, "Pastor, you have RUINED this church. You have ruined this church bringing these people here. We were a happy little respectable church. What's this going to say to young people? You have ruined this church."

He said, "Yes. I have. What are we going to do about it? Will you help me mentor these women?"

There was a long pause. Finally she said, "We just have to love them."

We can choose to lock the door. We can choose to live in fear and anxiety over what could ruin the church. But that is an existence without peace. Christ is sending us on a mission of love to people who need him most, and it is as we engage in that mission that our anxieties begin to melt away.

The preacher Carlyle Marney said, "This changes what church is for. Changes it utterly, no longer a ghetto for defense you become a center for redemptive witness where the world is."

I like how The Living Bible translates this verse in 2 Timothy:

2 Timothy 1:7

For the Holy Spirit, God's gift, does not want you to be afraid of people, but to be wise and strong, and to love them and enjoy being with them.

As the Father has sent me, so I'm sending you. The next words Jesus says to his disciples were these: "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*"

In the face of pressure, Christ gives the Holy Spirit.

We've got a little book at home called "Five Minutes' Peace" about this mother elephant. All she wants is to get away from her children for five minutes to soak in the bathtub alone. But of course, one by one, all of her children manage to find her. She eventually leaves them in the tub and goes to the kitchen, where she gets about 3 minutes of peace before they find her again.

Most of the time, we think of peace in terms of subtraction. Peace means escaping the distractions. Peace means taking away tension. Peace is the absence of conflict. The Jewish understanding of peace went the other way. It was the addition of something. The Hebrew word for peace is "shalom." It means more than just "no fighting" or "no noise." Shalom means wholeness and well-being. It's a sense of being filled up and complete and at rest. It's the quality of having everything needed for a full life.

That's the character of God. He's always complete, always whole. And his Spirit in our lives brings that wholeness to us. Like the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, peace isn't something we can manufacture for ourselves – it's a byproduct of him being in our lives.

This is the forklift we mentioned. When we're no longer alone, when we have the Holy Spirit, he does the heavy lifting. . The pressure to perform is removed. The more we live in the awareness of his presence in our lives, the more peace we find.

Romans 8:6

...the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.

I like the idea of a forklift in theory , but I still want to be the one to drive it. Peace is often a matter of not trying to be the one in control. Too often I try to take things into my own hands, pursue my own agenda. Whether it's comparing myself to somebody else and trying to measure up or whether it's wanting something God doesn't necessarily want for me but still trying to make it happen. I generate a lot of my own stress and un-peace by not letting my mind be controlled by the Spirit.

What does it look like to let him have control? It means talking to him about a situation and then living with his response. Praying and accepting the results. Monitoring my attitudes for signs that my motivations are selfish. Choosing to seek God's will before I act. All that may feel like it slows me down, but it will make room for the peace I can't find on my own.

Another word came from Christ to his disciples:

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

In the face of anger and conflict, Christ gives the power to forgive.

If you could have any superpower, what would it be? I know some of you already know how you would answer this one because you've thought about it for years. Flying? Super strength? Invisibility is pretty cool too.

In essence, Christ is giving his followers a super power here – the power to say you forgive somebody and have them really be forgiven. We have the authority to choose who we forgive and who we don't. The other person doesn't control whether or not we forgive them. The size of the hurt isn't bigger than our power. When we've received the Holy Spirit, we have the capacity to let go of anger and bitterness and resentment.

Without that forgiveness, there is no such thing as peace. We even have physical symptoms of how unpeaceful we are. We get ulcers. Our blood pressure spikes. We can't sleep.

Yet Christ says we don't have to be defined by our wounds. We don't have to let other people and circumstances hold that kind of power over us. We can forgive and have peace. Frederick Buechner writes, "For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each others' presence."

We might think of the biggest offenses as being the toughest to forgive, but in some ways, those situations are almost easier because the stakes are so high. If you've experienced a tragic loss or brutal pain at somebody else's hand, you know that forgiveness is almost a matter of survival. The rage and pain are so intense that letting go is necessary for moving on.

I think the small hurts trip us up, because we don't even think about forgiveness being necessary. The little grievances pile up and collect in the bottom of our heart. They bother us, but we don't think they're important enough to make the conscious effort to forgive. And over time they skew our outlook on the world.

What kind of hurt are you holding on to this morning? Maybe it's something that happened years ago and it has been eating you away all this time. Jesus says your power to forgive is bigger. Whoever you forgive is forgiven. Maybe there's something you haven't been able to forgive yourself for. Jesus has given you the authority to let that go, too. Whoever you forgive IS forgiven. That includes you. Maybe you're holding a grudge against God for not meeting your expectations. Life hasn't gone your way and you're blaming God. Jesus says you have the power to let it go, and that power is key to finding peace -- Peace within your own heart, peace with others, peace with God.

For Thomas, a lack of peace wasn't so much about anger or conflict as it was doubt. And **in the face of doubt, Christ gives himself.**

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Jesus said "Peace be with you". Then he showed his hands. Twice. Once to the eleven, once to Thomas. Sometimes words aren't enough, and Jesus knew Thomas needed something more than the reassurance of his friends. He needs a personal connection with the risen Christ. Peace is in the wounds themselves.

Look at these hands, Jesus says. Really look at them. See how brutally they were damaged. Check out this scar on my side. Peace was bought with blood and pain and tears. I'm not just giving you some motivational thoughts on how to find peace. I'm giving you my own self.

The cross is at the center of our peace.

Colossians 1:21

... Christ's death on the cross has made peace with God for all by his blood.

We started out this morning talking about the peace symbol. Want to know something interesting? When Gerald Holtrom was developing the design, his first instinct was to use a cross. That's God's peace symbol, far more powerful than any logo or protest or sit in because it was the highest price he could pay for reconciliation.

So showing the hands was a way for Jesus to prove the depth of his love and how far he was willing to go for peace. But Thomas needed more than proof of Christ's love -- he needed proof of his power, proof that he was really alive.

Showing the hands meets that need, too. Look Thomas. These are living, moving hands. My wounds are no longer fatal. They're scars. They are memories of the death that I have beaten.

Our cry for answers is met not in words, but in the hands. Christ's very person is where we find what we're looking for.

Ephesians 2:14

For he himself is our peace.

It's not in a simpler lifestyle or a new yoga position or a cease fire treaty. True peace is only found in an encounter with the Jesus who died to secure it.

You might be sitting here this morning thinking, "That's great for Thomas. But I can't see him. He hasn't shown me his hands." And in one sense you'd be right.

I would respond with two observations. First, the fact that Thomas saw Jesus wasn't what made Christ alive. Just ask the other disciples. The hands were as real and powerful before Thomas saw them for himself. Since the time Jesus returned to heaven, Christians haven't had the luxury of that kind of physical encounter. At our point in history, all we have is the record of a skeptic whose mind was changed by seeing those hands. But our seeing or not seeing isn't what makes the resurrection real. And Christ told Thomas that there's actually an added blessing for us in the not seeing.

Secondly, I would like to point out that he still shows his hands today, but in a completely different way. There is a church in Soweto, South Africa, where this statue of Jesus stands. In the days of apartheid, public gatherings were banned, so people would often meet in churches. Police raided the church, and in the fighting that followed, the statue was knocked to the floor.

When the dust settled and the statue was set upright again, it was discovered that the hands had been broken off in the fall. But after considering it, the church decided not to reattach them, as a reminder that as Christ's body, we ourselves are his hands in the world now.

Dennis Ngien grew up in Vietnam. He says, "When I was eight years old, I lost my father to cancer. A week after his burial, I became severely ill...I still remember how my mother, newly widowed, cared for me. Instinctively she took me in her arms and caressed my back with her gentle hands, reassuring me with words of comfort and love for me. I grew so sick that I was hospitalized. Since we lived in a remote village about ten miles from the hospital, my mother carried me there on her back, walking powerfully,

up hill and down. With tears streaming down her cheek, she said, “Son, Daddy is not here. But Mommy is still here. Hang in there. We will make it to the hospital soon.”

Then he says this. “This childhood experience confirmed for me that a love that does not suffer with the suffering of the beloved is not love at all. What consolation would it have been if my mother had remained aloof from my suffering?”

We are the hands of Christ. When we share in the suffering of others, we are showing his wounded hands. When we have peace in the middle of a crisis, we show his hands are still alive.

The author of Hebrews encourages us to make every effort to live in peace. God gives us the gift of peace freely. It’s there. Are we choosing to live in it?

What picture of peace are you needing this morning? Do you need to see some wall smashed down? Karin offered to pray with someone who was going through a difficult time this week, and her answer was, “No...he and I aren’t really talking right now.” Christ came to smash down those walls and let the peace flood through.

Maybe you need a welding iron to knit you back together with a family member. Maybe you’re feeling crushed under a weight of pressure and you need a forklift. Or you’re feeling like you need God’s protection in that armored car. Tell God what strong form of peace you’re needing today.

What hurt are you finding too big to forgive? Jesus has given you power to let it go. Peace will not settle until you can pass on the forgiveness you’ve been given.

What hurt did you think was too small to forgive? Tiny enough to hold onto and think it was okay? That has to go too.

Finally, who needs you to be the hands of Jesus? The church is being ruined by people different from you, people with ugly wounds and glaring faults. We have to love them. Nothing shows Christ more fully. And nothing has greater possibility for bringing peace.