



PEACE & GLOBAL WITNESS
SPECIAL OFFERINGS
PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION

Season Sermon
Special Offerings, 2017

Ephesians 2:14–17

“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. **So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near . . .**”

South Sudan has been fraught with problems for many, many years. In 2011, a time of relative peace finally came to South Sudan, a newly formed country after decades of tension and fighting with its neighbors. The peace was short-lived, however, as political and ethnic divisions that had once divided the country resurfaced and incited further violence. Over the next few years, the violence, division, and unrest only got more intense. In 2015, a famine began to take hold on the region, further complicating life for those living in the area. People have been displaced and made refugees by starvation, by political unrest, and by violence. As refugees flee their homes, they settle in camps like the one in Uganda where John found himself.

John is an Episcopal clergyman who specializes in serving traumatized communities. A refugee in Uganda himself, he found that, despite his own displacement, his service and ministry are even more helpful in this setting. The famine and the violence have displaced many people, and so they are forced to live side by side in this camp, despite significant ethnic or political differences. John sees his work to be supporting the people of this forced community as they try to reconcile their differences and come to an understanding that allows them to live with each other in this impossible situation. These people are now finding that they are not only living beside one another and coping with each others differences, but they are *living with and supporting* one another. The work that John is doing is helping a broken community find peace, reconciliation, and unity.

In Ephesians 2, the author is engaging a conversation of unity and reconciliation among the early Christians. The early church—not just in Ephesus, but in many parts of the fledgling Christian world—was learning how to understand its own identity. It was long settled that both Jews and Gentiles, people of deeply different cultural backgrounds, were

to be integrated into the same Christian communities equally, but the implementation was where the struggle was most difficult. After all, it's one thing to *say* that we are looking to be inclusive across dividing lines, but a totally different thing to actually do it.

The Jewish Christians of the early church were used to living lives that revolved around differentiating themselves culturally from the Gentiles—the others. To bring those Gentiles into their fold, or even to create a new community where such differing people groups were now equal, was a struggle! It is in this context that the author reminds the churches reading this letter: “[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one . . .” The very body of Christ is what brings us together, and Christ’s life and death are what lead us to live in peace together. The author drives this point home in verse 16 when he says that through Christ, we must not only be made into one, but we are to be *reconciled*. The two communities, now one in Christ, are not just to be peacefully co-existing, rather they are to be reconciled and unified. Those who are far away—people of different tribes and communities—and those who are near—neighbors of differing opinions and historic divisions—all are to be reconciled to one another.

This call to reconciliation and equalization is one that goes far beyond the early Christian communities hundreds of years ago. These words empower us to claim them for our own communities today. They give us a challenge that will most certainly make us aware of our shortfalls as congregations and as the church, while giving us a goal to work toward. We are to live in peace with those who are part of the body of Christ—both those who are near and those who are far away. We must live in peace—and by peace, we must mean truly reconciled peace and unity. This peace is more than just coexisting or coping with the existence of others; rather it is recognizing their integral existence in the church and knowing that, without them working in and serving the Kingdom of God, our life would be incomplete. It is acknowledging differences and coming to terms with them. It is admitting fault in past experiences that were hurtful, extending forgiveness for what was inflicted, and being committed to working through existing problems. It is an active process, one that can be intense and hard. It takes energy and persistence. But in that work and in that lifelong journey of reconciling, peace is proclaimed. Christ’s peace is then shared. It is shared with those who are far away—people from different tribes and communities, different churches and families—and those who are near—people of differing opinions and across historic feuds, from opposing sides of history and of seemingly competing lifestyles. When reconciliation directs the relationships, peace flows from every interaction.

Christ’s death gave life to a world that suffers through division and hostility. The power our Lord has over sin and death is manifested in the reconciliation and forgiveness that we find in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another. In Christ’s life and death, a model of reconciliation was given, one that brought together and repaired the connection between all of humanity and God. Further, it gives us a model that

will help us come together with the rest of the community of faith of which we find ourselves a part.

As Christ is our peace and our model of reconciliation, we are to follow that example and that calling to proclaim peace to those who are far off and those who are near. Our working for peace and reconciliation must then be proclaimed in everything we do. The Peace & Global Witness Offering is the proclamation of the Church that we believe this work is important and part of our life as Christians. It is our support of ministries like those of John from South Sudan, working to reconcile communities in tension living in refugee camps in Uganda. It is in training leaders to de-escalate tension in communities wrestling with gun violence. It is in the work of our presbytery to advocate for those who are disadvantaged. And it is in the work that our congregation does to serve those within our own reach. This proclamation of Christ's peace is an incredible message that inspires hope and wholeness for our congregation and immediate neighborhood but also goes out into the world to find peace and unity in ways we would have otherwise never imagined.

In this season of peace, and as we approach the Lord's Table for World Communion Sunday, this message comes to a peak. We gather at the table where Christ's body is broken and Christ's peace is shared. We gather at the table, remembering the life and death of Christ that has reconciled us with God and with one another. We look forward to that day in eternity when all will be gathered—from North and South, from East and West—for that wonderful feast. We recall that all those who will be gathered, from far off and from nearby, are part of this family and are those to whom we must be reconciled. This table that we gather around is a symbol of the work we are doing so that we might proclaim peace and reconciliation with the members of the body of Christ—those who are nearby and those who are far off. As we gather at this table, we are reminded of that peace that we are to work toward, that peace that we will one day experience in the fullness of time and at the wholeness of that final day.

Amen.