

SUNDAY, February 23, 2025 EPIPHANY7 Forgiveness and Peace

Psalm 37 | Corinthians 15 35-38, 42-50 Luke 6:27-38

Merriam Webster has many word puzzles on its website. One of the puzzles is called Blossom where one is given 7 letters in the shape of a flower. There are 6 petals and the centre with each containing one letter. The task is to create 12 words with these letters, using the centre letter in each one. You can use the letters more than once to create words and the more letters one uses in each word you receive more points and if you use all 7 letters it is a pangram and you get even more points!

One of the flowers this week contains the letters P R M A C K and the centre letter is E. Playing this game wakes one up and gets you alert because it causes you to think of words that may be challenging or just right in front of your eyes! Some of you have probably looked at these letters and come up with 'marker packer creamer...but what about PEACEMAKER. How easy it is sometimes to see what is in front of us-- but other times not. And how true is it to see something that we might look at and it is just not there- such is the case of peace.

Our reading from Luke 6 continues Jesus' teaching on the plain. Last week our focus was on the blessings and woes that Jesus shared with his listeners. Those blessings or woes seemed to be backwards to what was expected by those gathered around him. This is also true in what Jesus is saying in this passage for today. *'Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you and if anyone takes away your goods do not ask for them again. DO to others what you would have them do to you.'*

But how might we really do this? There is a story about an old baker named Thomas who lived in a small village. Thomas was known for his bread and kind heart. His only known adversary was a bitter widow, Agnes, who resided across the street, with her face in a scowl and her eyes filled with suspicion. She once was a kind woman, but a tragic accident left her husband and son dead, which turned her into a recluse blaming the world for her misfortune. Yet Thomas, always left a fresh loaf on her doorstep every morning, a silent act of kindness that went mostly unnoticed.

One winter, a blizzard isolated the village from the outside world with snow piled high which made it impossible for anyone to leave their homes. Agnes, relied on the local grocer but soon found herself running low on food. Thomas realized he had not seen his neighbour out

and realized her predicament. So he gathered a basket full of bread, a pot of warm soup, and a few apples, and walked through the snowdrifts to her door. Agnes, was startled by Thomas her unexpected visitor who smiling placed the basket on her porch. He spoke gently to Agnes, "It's a cold day and I thought you might need a bit of warmth."

Agnes, hesitantly accepted the food with tears in her eyes. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice trembling. "You know how I feel about you." "We all have our burdens, Agnes, but that doesn't mean we can't share a little kindness."

As the blizzard raged on, Thomas continued to bring Agnes food and company. He shared stories of his childhood, and she, in turn, opened up about her lost family. Slowly Agnes' defensive walls began to fall and were replaced by a sliver of hope.

Eventually spring came and new life was springing forth. So too was Agnes who no longer was a bitter widow. She started to smile more and occasionally returned kindness to Thomas with her honey cakes. Thomas' act of loving his enemy had not only softened Agnes' heart but had also brought a sense of peace to Thomas, proving that even in the coldest of winters, a little bit of love can thaw the most frosted of souls.

When we hear this story what is it that we understand takes place to bring about changes in both Thomas and Agnes. We realize that Thomas offers kindness unconditionally to his neighbour even though she is negative. The circumstances in which they find themselves with little food and winter storms raging force them to interact. The walls which closed Agnes slowly come down as each shares their stories. By just delivering bread there is an act of compassion. It is through Thomas' genuine care for her that she begins to see a different way of living and opens her heart to smiling as winter gives way to spring.

But what about us? How are we to seek peace as we love our enemies? One of the things Agnes stated to Thomas was why? His response was simply, we all have our burdens-challenges, questions, experiences of wondering, "but that doesn't mean we can't share a little kindness."

Peacemaking is not an easy task for anyone to do. If it was, wars and disagreements would end even before a third person enters the situation. Yet there are many kinds of situations that call us to make peace with others or to resolve conflicts. When Jesus remarks about a person striking one on the cheek what he suggests seems inappropriate because he invites the other to strike the second cheek. But when we think of the action involved here, the one getting

hit, is moving in response towards the other to tempt the hitter to do it again. This is a split second decision on the hitter's part- do they hit the second time with their opponent facing away? Or do they stop and try to come to a resolution.

But what is this resolution? No violence, no hitting, but peace. How might peace come from what has occurred? Just reflect for a moment about conflicts in which you have been a part. Have you seen the situation from the other's perspective as you witness frustration expended to the point of what needs and should be done? Did you hear fully what was said or completed before reacting or responding? Sometimes one becomes hurt, with emotions rising and stress levels increasing to the point where one needs to walk away. In order to seek a peaceful resolution one must consider one of 5 common responses to conflict.

- 1) avoidance: to withdraw, suppress and deny the existence of the conflict. Most likely the conflict will resurface again with more intensity and a greater potential for destruction
- 2) accommodation need to preserve the relationship, even if it means conceding one's own goals.
- 3) competition win-or-lose style which uses a super high concern for the achievement of personal goals, even at the risk of damaging or destroying relationships.
- 4) compromise a middle ground to others as it reflects some willingness to compete for a particular resolution, but also some accommodation of the relationship between the parties. This includes providing the other side with concessions while at the same time expecting concessions from them.
- 5) collaboration combines a high concern for both people and objectives. It's a win-win for everyone involved and asks "Is there a way to move beyond the adversarial positions evident in conflict, understand the others and then proceed to find a mutually-satisfying solution?"

Jesus calls us to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In other words, we are to treat others as you would want to be treated and more than this, to treat all as God has treated us. What this means is offer to others a fairness and kindness of heart because of the grace you have been given. The grace that God gives each day. The grace that tells us again and again that God loves us. But we must do what God asks-- confess those things which go against Christ's teachings so that we will receive the gift of grace and know that we are forgiven.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, 'A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person.' Yes it is difficult and risky to do this but in the presence of God no one is alone. But when we treat others with love and respect there is peace and forgiveness is lived out in action and with hope.

Forgiveness may occur with words, but to live in peace takes much time and effort. Much more time and effort than mixing up a word puzzle and seeing a bigger picture. But when there is forgiveness it is the beginning of new life for all involved. This is what Paul writes about in I Corinthians 15 using the illustration of a seed that must die to rise again with new life.

Forgiveness calls us to take risk in what we might say and do- but the overall result is what we might seek even more than this-- peace. What is peace worth? The value of peace is not a commodity but has been defined as 'qualitative energy that brings balance.' We realize that World Peace grows through nonviolence, acceptance, fairness and communication. Peace is the main characteristic of a civilized society and sometimes we might wonder are we really civilized from what is occurring around the world? Peace must begin with each one of us for it is Christ's peace which we share together as a community of faith which calls us all to be disciples.

Let us pray

God of hope and love, we praise you for the gift of forgiveness even with its risks. We pray for peace and it is our hope that peace will prevail on earth. Hear these our prayers from our hearts. SILENCE Amen.