

## **Sermon for Zion, December 08, 2019 – Advent 2 – The Sunday of Peace**

**Hymns:** 119 – Hope is a Star vss 1,2; The Advent of our God; 124 – People in darkness; 740 – Make me a channel of your peace

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:12-22; Luke 10:25-37

**Sermon Title:** He United Us in Peace

### **Ephesians 2:12-22 - CEV**

*At one time you did not know about Christ. You were foreigners to the people of Israel, and you had no part in the promises that God had made to them. You were living in this world without hope and without God, and you were far from God. But Christ offered his life's blood as a sacrifice and brought you near God.*

*Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. Christ gave his own body to destroy the Law of Moses with all its rules and commands. He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person, when he united us in peace. On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body. Christ came and preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews, who were near God. And because of Christ, all of us can come to the Father by the same Spirit.*

*You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God. You are like a building with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone. Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord. And you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God's own Spirit to live.*

### **Luke 10:25-37 – NIV**

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

*He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

*But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

*In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them*

*to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

*"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

*The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*

*Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*

I'll always remember standing on a certain steep, rocky hillside in Israel, looking down into the valley known as Wadi Qelt, the deep riverbed which divides the Judean hills from the mountains of Samaria, where once ran the ancient Jerusalem to Jericho road. It was perhaps here that Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan; it was certainly where the parable was set; a truly rough and inhospitable place; a bad place, 2000 years ago, to get mugged.

But, in Jesus' parable, a man did get mugged, thoroughly mugged, left for dead in the rocks by the side of the road. You know the outlines of the story; a good and upright man, walking along, sees the poor victim but chooses to not get involved; another passer-by, a religious type, fears the contamination the body might bring, and hurries away. But a third traveller, a Samaritan, the Good Samaritan, takes pity on the man, cares for him, goes above and beyond, walks the extra mile.

That's the story, and we know it well. But we don't know it well enough. Because to really appreciate what's going on in this parable, we have to inhabit, at least for a moment, the world of those who heard it. You see, those to whom Jesus first told it, including the lawyer whose question prompted this story, hated the Samaritans. "Those people," they would have called them. "Those Samaritans." And the way they would have said "Samaritans" would have made you think of something stuck to the bottom of your shoe. Whereas for us, when we hear "Samaritan," or especially "Good Samaritan," that's not what we think. We think of a wonderful person, performing a selfless act of kindness. What's going on here?

To help us understand, here's a 90 second history lesson: If you look at a map of Israel from the days of Jesus, you see Judea in the South, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are; you see Galilee in the North, where Nazareth and Capernaum are; and smack dab in the middle, you see Samaria. Where the Samaritans are. Where did they come from?

Remember King David's son Solomon, the wise king? He wasn't only wise, he was a big spender, covering his lavish expenditures with high taxation and federal deficits. When he died, the bankrupt nation erupted in a civil war, with the country split between two kingdoms – Israel to the North, and Judea to the South. Judea's capital was Jerusalem; the capital of the rebel kingdom Israel was Samaria.

Now divided and vulnerable, the country was soon attacked, with the northern kingdom lost to the Assyrian empire. Much of its population was deported – the now famous Ten Lost Tribes of Israel – and people from foreign lands, bringing their foreign gods, were imported. The residents of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, now called Jews, considered the people of Samaria rebels, idolators, and a mongrel race. The Samaritans, for their part, resented the Jews, and claimed that their own altered version of Judaism was the more correct one. The Samaritans even built a Temple of their own on Mount Gerazim. The Hasmonean Jews destroyed it when they briefly conquered Samaria. More bad feelings were born.

All that took place throughout the 700 years before Jesus. And rather than time healing old wounds, it only hardened the division, the hatred and suspicion running both ways. If you think the Israelis and the Palestinians of today have problems getting along, just remember that conflict is only 70 years old. The conflict with the Samaritans had been going on for 700 years. That's a lot of accumulated resentment. And now you know the trouble Jesus is getting into, in telling this seemingly innocent story of the Good Samaritan. He's putting his foot right in it.

And he steps in with a story. A story to answer the question, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" That's a big question. So we better pay attention, if eternal life is something we are interested in inheriting as well.

*An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

*"What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?"*

*The lawyer answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

"*Right answer,*" says Jesus. But remember, the fellow asking the question is a lawyer. So he looks for a loophole. "*Who is my neighbour?*" he asks. It's a trickier question than it seems. After all, "*Who is my neighbour?*" Neighbour literally means, "the farmer nearby." So is it just the guy next door? What about across the street? Is it just the people I like? Or does it include that grumpy oddball who always yells at the kids to get off his lawn, and blows snow onto your driveway in the winter?

"*Who is my neighbour?*" Is it only people like me? People of my nationality or ethnicity or class or religion? Is it only people we know to be good? There is a popular writing from the time of Jesus and the lawyer called The Wisdom of Sirach, which says, "*Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they*

*might subdue you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done to them.*” According to Sirach, your neighbour only includes the people you consider to be good. Help the sinner, and it’ll backfire on you for sure.

So, who is my neighbour? That’s the lawyer’s question. Luke says he asked it, *“in order to justify himself.”* The lawyer has been good to people who have been good to him. He likes those who are like him. He’s loves those who love him. Surely that’s all God expects. And in response, Jesus tells a parable.

A victim of a vicious mugging is left for dead on the side of the road - the Jerusalem to Jericho road – a narrow, hilly, dangerous stretch of ground, which you better make in a day, because you don’t want to be out there at night. In fact, if you’re walking it, you’re better off in a group. Jackals of the animal and human variety prowl that road. Psalms were written for walking it, to give you courage when you face the dangerous climb. *“I look around at these hills,”* writes the Psalmist (121); *“Where is my help going to come from?”* That’s the road. That’s the setting.

And now the victim. *“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”* Everybody nods. They’ve heard this sort of story before. Same thing happened once to a guy they heard about. Happens all the time.

*“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.”* Quite right, think the hearers. Might be a trap. Or it might be a robber, set upon by other robbers. In any case, not the priest’s business. Somebody else’s problem. Besides, a priest can’t be messing around with bodies. Doesn’t it say in Leviticus (21:1), *“A priest must not make himself unclean by touching a dead person?”* And this fellow looks dead. Or close enough. So the priest passes by. Way on the other side of the road. Perfectly reasonable response. The story continues.

*“So too, a Levite who worked in the Temple, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”* As he should, think the hearers. If he comes in contact with a corpse, or is defiled by contact with a sinner, he can’t do his job at the Temple. Then what? Plus, what could he do, in the middle of nowhere? So he passes by too, also on the other side. Far away from possible trouble. Don’t get involved. That’s the thing.

Jesus continues: *“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was.”* A Samaritan – boo! A hated Samaritan! Lowest of the low! Despised by all thinking people! Not even a person, a thing! Remember Sirach, from whom we heard earlier? Here’s what he wrote: *“Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem –*

*the Samaritans.*” A Samaritan – I hate to think what he’s going to do to that poor helpless fellow.

And now Jesus drops the bomb: “...and when the Samaritan saw the injured man, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, a couple day’s wage, and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

The crowd is silent. There are awkward looks. Maybe even a bit of hostility. And now it is Jesus’ turn to ask a question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

“The one who helped him,” admits the lawyer, through gritted teeth, not quite bringing himself to say, “The Samaritan.” And Jesus looks him in the eye, and says, “Go and do likewise.”

And so Jesus redefines our neighbour as the one in need of our help, our protection, our assistance, our love. The one in whom others see no value. That one is our neighbour. That is the one we are to love as ourselves.

In Jesus’ day, people were separated by walls constructed of prejudice, suspicion, religious prohibition. They were barbed with hatred, by a false sense of racial superiority, maintained by generations of slights, grudges, resentments. The walls were invisible, but no less real than those constructed of brick or concrete or stone.

And so when Jesus tells us we must love God and our neighbour, and a man asks, “Who is my neighbour?” and Jesus says, “The guy on the other side of that invisible wall,” well, you can bet that got people thinking. Loving people on your side of the wall is easy. Loving people on the other is... not so easy at all.

The Apostle Paul spent his whole ministry – spent his life – knocking down these walls. Addressing the profound walls erected by centuries of warfare, oppression, hatred and suspicion, which separated Jews from non-Jews (us, really; back then we were called Gentiles). Paul writes the following:

*Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us... He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person, when he united us in peace. On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body. Christ came and*

*preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews, who were near God. And because of Christ, all of us can come to the Father by the same Spirit.*

*You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God. You are like a building with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone. Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord. And you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God's own Spirit to live.*

Christ took the walls which separated humanity, and through his sacrifice, dismantled them stone by stone, reassembling them into a holy temple we call The Church where all can gather as one. There is no more “us and them.” There is only “we.” No more strangers and foreigners; we are citizens together, followers of Jesus, brothers and sisters in the family of God. We are all neighbours, says Jesus. We are all deserving of understanding, of compassion, of healing, of help. No more hatred. No more suspicion. No more walls.

Who is on the other side of your invisible wall? Don't fool yourself; we all have walls. You have one. You've built it. Subconsciously, consciously, you've built it. We all have. Who have you banished to the other side? Someone different than you? Maybe from a different country, different race, different customs? Or maybe it is someone you've hurt? Someone who's hurt you? Unkind words were exchanged. Unfair decisions were made. Unthinking things were done. Walls were built. Invisible bricks of Suspicion, Resentment, Hostility, Revenge, were stacked up over time, and now, for protection or for punishment or through prejudice, you've relegated people there.

This season of Advent, this Sunday of Peace, pray that God would help you to tear down your walls. Pray that God would lead you to make peace with those from whom you have been separated. Pray that God would change your attitude towards those you regard with suspicion, those whom you think of as somehow less than yourself. Pray that God would help you be a channel of forgiveness, of peace, of love.

*“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

*“What is written in the Law?” Jesus replied. “How do you read it?”*

*He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

*“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.