

Message for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (7/18/2021)
Ephesians 2:11-22

As I reflected this past week on our second reading from Ephesians today, I recalled a conversation I had as a young adult with a childhood friend. In reference to one armed conflict or another – it might have been the war in Afghanistan – I wondered aloud how the peoples of the world might someday learn to relate to each other without violence. My friend ended the conversation abruptly by saying, “We’ll never have peace. We’ll always be at war. It’s human nature.”

Although I reluctantly conceded that the historical evidence supported his claim, it never sat right with me. The strength of his conviction startled me. Since my friend was usually so light-hearted, his sudden cynicism seemed out of character. All the more reason to take him seriously, I suppose. I don’t know what he thinks now, but at the time he was convinced: “We’ll never have peace. We’ll always be at war. It’s human nature.”

Maybe you’re convinced, too. Maybe you’ve seen enough conquest and exploitation and rebellion, maybe you’ve seen enough ethnic and religious and political persecution, maybe you’ve seen enough world war, **maybe you’ve seen enough bloodshed to persuade you that violence is our nature, so violence is our destiny.**

But, if that’s the prevailing wisdom, then how are we supposed to receive the Apostle Paul’s words in today’s reading from Ephesians? “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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.” The original context of this passage is the division between Jew and Gentile in the ancient church, but if scripture is living and active, then Paul’s pronouncement applies to every rift in human community, then and now: *Christ is our peace*.

Notice that Paul does not heap responsibility for peacemaking onto the followers of Jesus; he doesn’t say, *Jesus was nonviolent, so we should be, too*. No, Paul claims that **Christ is already the locus of God’s peacemaking activity in the world, that is, the work of peace has already been and continues to be accomplished; Christ has broken down the dividing wall and continues to erode the barriers we erect so that he might establish and uphold our common humanity.**

But, do we really believe that? Where we see anything resembling peace in our world, it’s often little more than a truce or cease-fire – temporary, tenuous, not likely to overcome the divisions that caused the hostility in the first place.

“Piecemeal peace” – that’s what commentator Janet Schlichting calls it. She writes, “So often we use the word ‘peace’ to mean lack of visible conflict, where hatred or mistrust simmers beneath the surface.”¹ **Ironically, piecemeal peace is often maintained only through division; it’s only when we separate ourselves from one another that we have a sense of security. So, instead of entrusting**

¹ members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources.

ourselves to the peace of Christ, we rely on border walls and prison fences and gated communities.

The Israeli West Bank barrier runs 440 miles along the Green Line, the demarcation line set out in the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and its neighboring states. Israel built the wall in the early 2000s ostensibly as a security measure to deter terrorism. But, many ordinary Palestinians are suspicious of the wall because it effectively cuts them off from Jerusalem, establishing a *de facto* border between Israel and the West Bank.

Adjacent to the wall on the Bethlehem side and just five hundred meters from the checkpoint into Jerusalem sits The Walled Off Hotel, a functioning hotel founded and financed by the renowned yet elusive graffiti artist, Banksy. Since it butts up against the Israeli West Bank barrier, the hotel is billed as having “the worst view of any hotel in the world,” but it’s filled with original Banksy artwork, serving as a commentary on the complexity and tension of life in the Holy Land.

Recently the hotel displayed Banksy’s “The Scar of Bethlehem,” a nativity depicting Mary and Joseph kneeling beside the baby Jesus in front of the barrier wall with a bullet hole above their heads in place of the star.² So much for a silent night. The Prince of Peace himself lies helpless beneath a symbol of the violence and isolation that are part of everyday life in Bethlehem and the West Bank.

² www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/22/banksy-nativity-with-bullet-hole-in-place-of-star-unveiled-in-bethlehem.

Yet, for as cynical as we might be about the possibility of peace in the world as we know it, **the gospel promise today is that God has made peace already. God's own compassion, God's own provision, God's own love flow forth from the scarred and living Christ, drawing us to God and to one another regardless of our differences. And, that promise is what enables people of faith to keep waging peace in a war-torn world, to stubbornly, even foolishly, practice the *shalom* of God in the face of what appear to be impossible odds.**³

That's why the ELCA refuses to abandon the cause of peace in the Holy Land. Through the Peace Not Walls campaign, our denomination has made a long-term commitment to accompany the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) in its ministries of health, education, and humanitarian aid, to advocate for equal human dignity and rights for all people in the Holy Land – Jewish, Muslim, and Christian, and to raise awareness and garner support in our congregations.⁴

Christ is our peace, friends, and not the piecemeal peace that we've come to expect. By way of conclusion, let me borrow Janet Schlichting's words again:

God's peace is of a different sort. It is that peace which Paul says surpasses all understanding. It is a strange peace, a disruptive peace, a peace that often demands suffering, conflict, the pouring-out of self, all in the likeness of Jesus, who won our peace by his blood, who gave himself on a cross, uniting us "who were far off," who was killed for our hostility, who was broken for our wholeness.⁵

³ See George W. Stroup, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 258.

⁴ www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Peace-Not-Walls.

⁵ members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources.