

## 11/14/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Good morning! It is good to be together on this crisp November morning – we'll worship God, read and listen, sing and pray. Before we begin, let's take a few moments for announcements...

Today we come near the end of our series on Anabaptist Essentials; we've looked at the idea of reconciliation – individuals being reconciled to God, each of us being reconciled to one another and finally today, God's reconciliation with the world. One of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry wrote this:

"I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God." *The Art of the Commonplace; The Agrarian Essays*

What a beautiful confession of faith! Please join me now in the Call to Worship:

Leader: How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation:

People: Peace, peace, to those far and near, says the Lord.

Leader: The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.

People: They will neither harm nor destroy on all God's holy mountain,

Leader: They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

All: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord!

Prayer – O God, in days of old your people went up mount Zion in Jerusalem, to the Temple, to worship you and to be assured of your presence. In these days, you have promised your presence with us all the time and everywhere, through the gift of your Holy Spirit. Meet us here, in this temple, in this place, at this time. Amen.

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

I'll also include the family of Arlene Klassen who passed away at the Villa Healthcare in Hesston on Friday. She was the daughter of Simon Schmidt – her brother is Abe Schmidt and her sister is Joann (and Floyd) Nickel. Her service will be here at Alexanderwohl on Wednesday.

Loving God, we thank you for your call to us, your *mandate* to us, that we should gather together regularly to worship you, to fellowship together, to teach our children and one another about what it means to follow Jesus faithfully in our lives. Thank you for that call. In these days when our lives and our routines still feel kind of discombobulated and unpredictable, when we continue to feel the uncertainty and stress of covid-19 and other illnesses, we confess before you that making space for times of worship can seem unimportant. It can seem like what we need is to stay home, to withdraw, to hold tighter to our time and our

money and our loved ones. To be generous is hard when we're tired and stressed and uncertain. But God, you have called us to be reconciled in our relationship with you, with one another and with your world. And in order to do that we need to be fed, nourished, ready for what each day throws at us. We need to be hearing your word, challenged by its good news, nurtured in its stories. And so we thank you for this time to gather as your people, to offer you our gifts with joy and confidence, to be nurtured in our faith convictions. Thank you for your Holy Spirit presence here with us, leading and guiding us, hearing our prayers, giving us encouragement. We thank you for the generosity that we've been able to share recently – in this congregation and in our community. Thank you for those opportunities. Be with the people of our community today as the students put on the play again this afternoon at the high school and the GMA offers the drive-through meal.

God, we're grateful for your Spirit of comfort in times of need. We pray for the families of Harry Koehn, Mary Rodriguez and Arlene Klassen as they come together to give you thanks for the lives of these loved ones, to grieve and remember, to celebrate their lives. Be with them all in this time of loss.

We pray, God, for those who are ill and need your healing touch. We pray particularly for the Church family as they struggle with illness in their household that has set back the trip to Boston for Braxton and the postponing of those procedures for him. Continue to wrap this family in your love and care, gracious God. We pray for others who are ill – in body or in spirit. God, you are the great healer and we ask for your wholeness wherever it's needed.

Thank you God, for our youth and children – as they continue to learn about Jesus and how to be faithful to his teachings and the example that he gave us in his life. Be with all those who are preparing lessons for our children and youth; bless them with wisdom and patience and genuine care for their students. Thank you for the experience that our youth were able to have last week as they attended the special event in Hillsboro. May that experience offer growth and produce good fruit as they continue on their faith journey.

We pray, God for your people everywhere – those close to us and those around the globe. Make us mindful of your children whose basic needs are not met, those who struggle to have enough food, drinkable water, safe homes. Give us wise and open hearts as we consider what it means to be reconciled with you, with all people and with creation. We pray in the name of the one who showed us. Amen.

## BREAKING DOWN THE DIVIDING WALL OF HOSTILITY – PASTOR CALEB

### Ephesians 2:11-22

These days most of us really feel like there are walls that separate people. Not physical walls, but still walls that we feel. We are different. We are not all the same. Some differences may be fairly trivial – like which team you support.

Other divisions feel more profound. The division of differing politics in our polarized time. The division between believing Christians and non-Christians. The division between white folks and people of color, especially with the reminders of the dark legacies of slavery, segregation, and redlining.

This Sunday is the last on reconciliation. We have talked about reconciliation with God, reconciliation with one another in the church, and this third week is about reconciliation in the world.

In chapter 9 of *Anabaptist Essentials*, Palmer Becker discusses how Christians can be a part of the work of reconciling conflicts in the world.

There are other scripture passages I might have chosen that address that topic, like 1 Corinthians 10:3: *“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.”*

Our passage today doesn’t directly address warfare, but I believe it does address the root of warfare as well as the root of other conflicts in our world:

It’s the fact that humans tend to divide ourselves into separate tribes, whether for the sake of worshipping God as a group believes is most faithful, whether it’s a matter of survival or misplaced fear, or worse, our attempt to seize power and dominance over another group.

Functioning in our tribes may not always create huge problems, but it is the tribal mentality that feeds the bigger tragedies of war, oppression, exploitation, and hatred. Violence and hostility on a large scale or small scale always create dividing walls that separate people.

Each of us can think of experiences of coming against invisible walls of separation, whether big or small. While I’ve been blessed by relationships with people very different than me from Honduras, Ecuador, and Colombia, I also know the awkward divide that was simply a matter of fact because of our cultural difference, difference of nationality and race, difference of wealth and privilege.

Ephesians 2:14 gives an image so powerful, it’s familiar even to people that have never read the Bible – through his death on the cross, Christ destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. As we’ll see, Ephesians 2 asks us to hold together several important truths that we tend to separate.

One is that we have to hold together reconciliation across our human divides alongside reconciliation with God. In Ephesians, reconciliation with God happens at the same time that the two halves of humanity come together.

Second is that we have to hold together a vision of peace – and peacemaking work – with our faith in Christ, who became our peace, through his life, death, and resurrection. This also means that peacemaking and evangelism go hand in hand. The story of Jesus can never be divorced from tearing down dividing walls and making peace.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PASSAGE

Paul or perhaps a student of Paul gave these powerful words that cut to the heart of the gospel message. Peace is the central theme. Not peace as just cessation of conflict, but the thicker peace of biblical shalom, well-being and flourishing for everyone.

Peace between who? Who are the two that are brought into one?

Like other first-generation churches, there were some very open questions of what it really meant to have a church gathered around faith in what God had done through Jesus the crucified Messiah, a church with both Jews and Gentiles.

Jews were very much a distinct group in the first century, with their own ethnicity, their own culture, and their own separate religious practices, such as circumcision.

The image of a dividing wall probably brought memories of the barrier in the temple that non-Jews were expressly forbidden from crossing. Inscriptions warned Gentiles that they were seeking their own death if they dared cross.

Paul seems most focused on the Law of Moses and how it had turned into something that created boundary lines between insiders and outsiders, rather than a path for right relationship with God and love for humanity.

The challenge for the church was to worship God together without a sense of division or one group being superior to another. Paul believed that with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a new age of reconciliation had begun.

You can map out a very defined parallel structure in this passage as a whole (v. 11-22). When you do that, you clearly see this transformation of Gentile believers from a group alienated from God to being members of God's household. You can think of it like a sandwich – you have the two slices of bread, a slice of cheese on the top and the bottom and meat in the middle.

We start with the situation of Gentiles or non-Jews. They begin in a place of being alienated, strangers to the covenant and promises that God has made to the people of Israel. They are far.

The language used is even mildly insulting. The word "atheist" (or "without God") was an insult that pagans hurled at Jews and later Christians for not worshipping Roman gods, and here that insult is thrown back on the Gentiles as if to highlight the hostility.

On the other end of the sandwich, the situation is resolved, and we are no longer strangers and aliens, but members of one household of God. A little farther in in the sandwich, through the cross of Jesus, you who were far were brought near.

This idea is repeated at the other end of the sandwich: the good news of peace to the far and the near.

At the center of the structure, are verses 14-16, showing how God has brought peace, and made two groups into one.

He made the two into one  
And broke down the dividing wall

-- the hostility of enemies--

*In his flesh.*

The law of dogmatic commandments he rendered inactive

So that he could create the two groups  
Into one new human, *in himself*,  
--Thereby making peace--  
And so that he could reconcile the both in one body for God  
through the cross.

The tragedy of the crucifixion is instead the way that Christ put to death the hostility that separates people. Any violence, hostility, or for that matter any sense of alienation is absorbed in the cross and done away with. 1 Peter 2:23 says, "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten."

Just as Christ's body was broken at the cross and made whole at the resurrection, so broken and divided human beings are made one and whole when entering the body of Christ.

Imagine Group A and B (however you want to define them) moving closer to God. They can't do it without coming closer together. It's the work of Christ that brings us together, and we don't find reconciliation with God without being brought together.

#### IMAGE OF NEW TEMPLE

The passage finishes with another striking image. Let's not forget that the Jerusalem temple was highly important for Jews and not far from their minds. Earlier we were tearing down walls. Now we are building something new. Paul sees a new temple built on the foundation of Christ's foundation. Rather than a physical building, this is a temple of people.

It is the way we come together, as a people willing to rest on Christ's foundation, that we each become building blocks of a new structure. Whatever old structures defined our tribe are relativized, because the important building is this new dwelling place for God's Spirit, whenever people who were separated gather in Christ's name and become one.

#### IT'S ABOUT TEARING DOWN WALLS, NOT CREATING

One irony I see is that often professing Christians are more interested in creating walls of superiority around themselves instead of pursuing peace, while the folks most interested in peace and justice sometimes profess no faith in Christ.

This understandably leads us to wonder if peace and a Jesus-centered faith really have anything to do with each other. If Ephesians has been addressing the ways that pious Jews created walls that kept God's love, covenant, and promises to themselves, it would seem strange for Christians to try to do the same.

Let's hold together two ideas that seem to be in tension – root our belief and work for peace in our faith in Christ, while also celebrating whenever we see peacemaking happening, regardless of the beliefs of the peacemakers.

We don't need to limit God's Spirit or quibble about exactly how peace happens, but we can be clear that the well we draw from for living in peace is a *Jesus-centered faith*. The depth of our

well allows us to confidently relate to other human beings with curiosity and openness, and belief in a common ground, not fear and defensiveness.

I believe that in Christ, God knows the joys and sorrows and even death of the human experience. This somehow compels us to remember that no matter how deep our differences, we are united in the common experiences of the joy and suffering of being alive, the love and hurt of relationships.

#### STORY OF UNLIKELY RECONCILIATION

We have to believe in reconciliation in unlikely places. One of you shared with me the story of Daryl Davis, a black musician who had a chance conversation with a member of the Klu Klux Klan about music they both liked.

A seed was planted, and they kept in touch. Davis learned that as long as there was conversation, they weren't enemies. This first conversation set Davis on a mission to befriend KKK members and write a book about it. Through these relationships that showed they had something in common, two hundred clan members left the clan. Davis said, "I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves."<sup>1</sup>

The black theologian James Cone wrote a book comparing the crucifixion of Jesus to the lynching of black people in the United States. In both cases, Cone writes, "God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation, there is hope 'beyond tragedy'"<sup>2</sup>

Both the crucifixion and the mob lynching were gruesome. Somehow the tragic blood of both is wrapped up in a story of reconciliation that is still being written.

I should clarify what creating peace across walls of division is *not*. It is not a simple tolerance of difference. It is not supposing that we are all equally right at the same time – in fact, we are called to *both* hold deep convictions and to hold them with the humility of knowing there is much we don't know and understand.

Creating peace is not approving of every behavior (including our own). No one every said that everything's a-okay. If the present situation clearly isn't acceptable, then somebody, if not everybody, is going to have to change. But peace does start with acceptance of every *person as a person*.

"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," Paul says. God loves us and accepts us *before* we get our act together. So, we will have to follow the same pattern of accepting others as people with something of God, and people with beauty, all *before* the situation is fixed.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convincing-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>

<sup>2</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 166

## APPLICATION

Sometimes hearing about “big” issues makes it difficult to relate peace to our daily lives. We may feel that besides doing some form of alternative service rather than military service, peace is not relevant to our lives.

We have to start where we are. Peace has to start in our relationships closest to us: family, church family, and our community. As Mennonites, we are good at professing a theology of peace that looks to God’s reconciliation with the world in a new creation, but not knowing how to live it in our daily lives.

As we saw in the story of Daryl Davis’ conversations with members of the KKK, we can’t be too much of enemies with each other as long as we are talking to each other. So, we have to kick our habits of avoidance or distancing from others when we don’t agree. We have to stay connected, if nothing else, based on what we have in common.

My challenge to you: identify the invisible barriers affecting your life.

These could be barriers we somehow set up that keep us from finding a harmony between our external relationships, our relationship with creation, and our relationship with Christ – our faith and spirituality. These could also be barriers created from hurt and conflict we’ve experienced with others.

Your work may be *internal* – the work of allowing the love of Christ to slowly transform our wounds and our self-delusions. Or your work may be *external* – making an intentional change in your daily habits and in the way you relate to people in your life.

In life, there is not a simple fix for very much. But what might you do to take a step closer to let the Spirit dismantle these barriers, as you draw strength through your relationship with Christ?

## QUESTIONS

1. What things do you see separating people?
2. Do Christian mission and peacemaking go together?
3. How does peacemaking on the large scale relate to peacemaking at the micro level in our relationships and community?
4. Why is it important to find the peace of Christ within ourselves in order to live out that peace externally?

## BENEDICTION (BASED ON EPHESIANS 3:16-19)

May God strengthen you out of his glorious riches with power through the Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

May you, being rooted and established in love have the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ!

May you know this love that surpasses knowledge – and be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.