
He is our Peace

Ephesians 2.11-22

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 19, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

1919. 1945. 1969. The twentieth century gave us some striking examples of what it means to be at peace.

At the Versailles Conference in 1919 the allied powers decided peace meant defeating Germany and then keeping it in a straightjacket for as long as possible. Peace meant punishment and constant policing. At Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 peace meant killing 200,000 people at a stroke. Peace meant destroying and intimidating to a sufficient degree to end war and then making sure your enemy didn't get hold of the wherewithal to do the same to you. At the Woodstock Festival in 1969 peace meant smoking pot and growing your hair down to the ground and driving a rainbow colored VW Beetle and doing all three while making love to anyone you could get your hands on.

These are the kinds of images that come into our minds when we hear the word peace. Such a diverse range of uses makes the word peace seem either vague and idealistic or cynical and manipulative. The New Testament is neither vague nor idealistic nor cynical nor manipulative. It has two words for peace. One of those words is Jesus. Ephesians chapter 2 gives us perhaps the most concise description of the way Jesus is peace. Here are the five ways that Jesus is peace. All of them center on the word "one."

(1) First, in verse 15, Jesus makes *one new humanity*. It says he "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." I want to take a moment to explain why Christianity steers a unique path in political thought. One of the most significant questions in modern philosophy is, "Are humans all fundamentally the same, or are we different from one another in ways that aggregate us into separate and competing groups?" There are two conventional answers to this question.

One says, we are all fundamentally the same. This is the bumper sticker that proclaims "One race – the human race." The assumption seems to be that if we all realize we're the same we'll all suddenly be at peace with one another. The more we ignore or eradicate our differences, the happier life will be. We could call this the sophisticated version of the Woodstock approach. The trouble is, once you suppress our differences, we become unrecognizable to ourselves, let alone one another. Peace becomes a form of denial.

The other conventional answer to whether we're fundamentally the same or different says, no, we really are all different, and asserting our identity is central to our being, even though those differences, of age, mobility, intellect, genes, wealth, race, gender, access to resources and so on, make conflict with one another a perpetual and probable danger. So we need nation states and regulated government and careful policing to prevent us killing one another. This is how we get to Versailles. The trouble is, it's also how we get to Nagasaki. Peace becomes an olive branch covering the nakedness of raw power.

But Christianity says to both of these answers, Why do you assume that difference leads to violence? Why do you assume that violence is more basic than peace? Yes, we are all different from one another, but in God's sight difference is made for peace. Difference creates beauty, creativity, flavor, color, texture, harmony. Violent conflict lurks among the shadows of difference, and sometimes breaks into the foreground, but antagonism isn't written into the DNA of difference. God made us to be different from one another because he had a myriad of different things he wanted each one of us to do. We aren't made in a factory to be identical widgets; we are made by an act of love to rejoice in the detail of our difference from one another. The fundamental difference is the difference between us created beings and God the creator, and it's in the tension and creativity of that difference that life resides. Harmonious difference is what the universe is all about.

Think about someone you're struggling with right now. You're probably bewildered or infuriated by their difference from you. But there's no use ignoring the difference, and you can't control their effect on you for ever. The only answer is to find a way to make that difference creative and constructive. That may feel like a daunting prospect. But it's the only prospect you can genuinely call peace. Ephesians says Jesus brings us that peace. But it was daunting for him too. The cost to Jesus is the blood of his cross.

Jesus doesn't abolish difference. He's the embodiment of harmonious difference. He brings God and humanity together. He brings Jew and Gentile together. He makes possible and demonstrates and renews a world in which technicolor diversity can flourish while each entity enriches the life of every other. That's the kingdom of God. That's what his life and death and resurrection give us, now and for ever.

(2) So Jesus transforms our fears about being different. And the second thing Jesus does is to transform our fears about being the same. Jesus makes us, in verse 16, *one body*. When we say the creed we recall how Jesus became a human being like us. He brought divinity into our humanity. But just as significant is what Jesus did in the other direction. He brought humanity into the heart of God. When we say Christians are the body of Christ we're not just saying that there is a divine dimension to everything Christians do together. We're also saying that the joy, the blessing, the struggle, the sin and the pain of human striving on earth is taken into the life of God. This is the paradox of Christian belief: God is utterly *different* from us – eternal where we are temporal, all-knowing where we are foolish, all-loving where we are self-absorbed. But God is unbreakably *connected* to us through Jesus in a way that does not diminish God but only ennobles and enriches us. The image Ephesians gives us of what it means to be both different and the same is the picture of one body, with countless interdependent parts. And to demonstrate how much that is at the center of God's purpose and identity Ephesians calls that body Christ's body.

I wonder what is your greatest fear. For most people the greatest fear is being finally fundamentally alone. The fear of pain and death is only a part of the bigger feeling of being utterly alone forever. And the most destructive things people do tend to arise out of a terror that they are or may become utterly alone. Jesus' gift of peace to us is to promise that he will never leave us alone.

So this is how these first two priceless gifts fit together. We are *different* from one another, and in Christ that difference from one another becomes part of the dynamism of our difference from God, and so it leads not to endemic antagonism but to kaleidoscopic creativity. But yet we are *one body*, and in Christ that means we are deeply bonded to one another as we are deeply bonded to God. That is what peace means.

(3) And the third thing we discover, this time in verse 18, is that we have access to the Father in *one Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the part of God that gives us here and now and for ever and always those things that Jesus brought us once and for all. Jesus has shown us and brought us peace, but we need the Spirit to continue to make peace in and among us. The one Spirit proclaims "peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near." One of the most difficult things in life is to balance your care for those who are near, your regular circle of friends and family and neighbors and colleagues, with your responsibility for those who are far off, distant friends, family, fellow citizens, people of other nations and faiths and citizens. In Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House* he describes one Mrs. Jellyby who spends every hour of the day campaigning about the plight of the people of far-away Borrioboola-Gha while failing to see that her own neglected children are disintegrating around her. And we all know how easy it is to become so wrapped up with a small circle of intimates, so that we can't register the needs of those outside our own tiny world. I don't think I know anyone who really gets this balance right.

It's hard to be at peace with and at peace with those who are near. It could be that in Ephesians those who are far off refers to the Gentiles and those who are near refers to the Jews. But it's just as easy to think of those who are far off as meaning those who feel by their life and actions they've put themselves beyond the reach of God and those who are near as meaning those who feel they're just the most righteous and worthy people of all time. I wonder whether you're more at peace with those who are far off, or with those who are near. I wonder whether you feel you've put yourself beyond God's mercy, or whether you feel you're nearer to God than thee. Jesus is our peace because he gives us the Holy Spirit to reconcile those from whom we are far off and those to whom we are near. Jesus is our peace because he gives us the Holy Spirit to reconcile the parts of ourselves that are far from God and the parts of ourselves that are near.

(4) And the fourth thing Jesus makes, in verse 19, is *one household*. The three Greek letters 'oik' which represent the core of the word for home appear no less than six times in the last four verses of Ephesians 2 – we have 'aliens', 'household members', 'built', 'structure', 'built together' and 'dwelling place,' all coming out of the same

root of 'home' – 'oik'. And the same root gives us the words 'economics' and 'ecology'. And it's economics and ecology that today show us the full significance of how Jesus brings us peace.

How does Jesus transform economics and ecology? Well think for a moment about what both disciplines take for granted. They take for granted that there's not enough. Economics says there's not enough money, not enough wealth, not enough healthcare, education, GDP, equity, liquidity – whatever there is there's not enough of it. Ecology says there's not enough oxygen, ozone, species diversity, rainforest – you name it, there's not enough of it. Economics and ecology are all about scarcity. And so of course they presuppose conflict, because we're bound to fight over limited and diminishing resources.

But Jesus is all about abundance. The resurrection of Jesus proclaims that there's more than enough of the things that really matter, the things that last for ever. There's more than enough life in everlasting life, there's more than enough mercy in the forgiveness of sins, there's more than enough joy in the song of heaven, there's more than enough love in the peace that passes all understanding. Jesus' economics and Jesus' ecology bring us peace because they teach us the secret of happiness, which is learning to love the things that God gives us in plenty and never run out. Things like love, joy, and peace. Jesus doesn't give us too much of the things we fight over, because we'd still fight over them. Instead he gives us in plenty the things we don't need to fight over. We call these things the words of eternal life. That's how Jesus is our peace.

(5) And the fifth thing Jesus makes, in verse 21, is *one holy temple, one dwelling place for God*. This is the climax of the whole symphony. Remember, step one was, we think difference makes conflict, but in Christ difference makes kaleidoscopic creativity. Step two was, we think we're alone and isolated, but Jesus creates an unbreakable bond with one another and with God. Step three was, we think we're bound to tread on and fight with those close to us or club together with those close to us to fight those who are far away, but Jesus gives us one Spirit that reconciles us to those near and far. Step four was, we think we live in an economy of scarcity but Jesus creates an ecology of abundance. The more we keep assuming conflict is unavoidable the more Jesus shows himself to be our peace.

Finally he makes us into one temple. That means he makes us the place of encounter with those who long to meet and be reconciled with God. He turns us from his huge problem into his simple prayer. He transforms us from a battleground to a sanctuary. He makes us the living examples of his salvation. He makes us the embodiments of peace. Finally, after the greatest battle of them all, the one Christ fought for us on the cross against sin, death and the devil, he makes us into a peace the world has never before known, and everything becomes worship. That's what heaven is – the place of harmonious diversity where we as one body, whether saints who know we've had a past or sinners who know we have a future, enjoy the things that never run out and all finally becomes worship.

Now you'll remember at the beginning I said the New Testament has two words for peace. And I said the first one is Jesus. I didn't say what the second one is. There is a second one. It's what happens when there is harmonious difference and costly unity and constant reconciliation and never-failing abundance and everything finally becomes worship. You know what the second one is, otherwise you wouldn't be here today. The second word for peace in the New Testament is church.