

Peace and Acceptance

Mark 1:1-8

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be back together this morning. I feel like I've been away more than I've been here lately! I'm glad to be home with all of you.

How many of you are familiar with the "Prayer of Serenity"? Serenity means a state of being calm, peaceful or untroubled. Well, if the name doesn't ring a bell, you're probably familiar with the words. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." You'll often see the prayer on decorated plaques or posters. This prayer is also often used in 12 step programs, such as alcoholics Anonymous. I'll admit this prayer though has always kind of rubbed me the wrong way. It's a little bit cheesy, a little bit simplistic. Really, I don't like how the prayer seems to imply that the secret to inner peace and calm is to...give up. Accept that some things can't be fixed, and live with it. Bam. Then you'll be peaceful and content in your soul. Ugh.

Now I know that's probably not how the author of that famous prayer intended it to be taken. I know that by nature, I am a fixer. It drives me crazy when something is broken, or when I am facing a problem, or WORSE when someone I love is facing a problem. I

just want to get in there and fix it! You're sad? Here, let me cheer you up! Your stuffed animal lost an eye? I'll grab my sewing kit! I just want to make things better. And the prayer of serenity is telling me that's not always possible? Ha! Just watch me.

It goes against our cultural notions of possibility, the idea that not everything that is broken can be fixed, not every problem has a solution. If someone says, "It can't be done." That's a challenge, right? A chance for us to rise to the occasion? To band together to make something good and new? Even within the church when we talk about peace, it often goes hand in hand with action. Peace Work is a common term within the Mennonite Tradition.

As we journey through Advent together, I'm continuing to work with the Carmelite tradition's Advent themes. Last week, we talked about waiting and hope. The words for this week are "acceptance" and "peace." When we, as the church, think and talk about peace, what role does acceptance play? Is acceptance about more than just giving up? Is there a way to think of acceptance as a sacred calling? Let's explore some of that together using our scripture for this morning.

Our text for this morning, which Roger read for us, actually tells us a lot about how peace and acceptance go hand-in-hand in the Bible. John the Baptist was the one who God called to be the forerunner of Jesus, literally the one who prepares the way. Who announces the coming of Jesus. John was the (second cousin) of Jesus, their mothers Mary and Elizabeth, were first cousins. Elizabeth and Zachariah, John's parents, were

told by an Angel that John's role would be in this new thing that God was doing. This is from Luke chapter 1, "The angel said to him, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John. He will be your pride and joy, and many people will be glad that he was born. As far as the Lord is concerned, he will be a great man. He will never drink wine or any other liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring many people in Israel back to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of the Lord with the spirit and power that Elijah had. He will change parents' attitudes toward their children. He will change disobedient people so that they will accept the wisdom of those who have God's approval. In this way he will prepare the people for their Lord." John's parents are told right from the get-go who their son will be and what his role will be. And as a parent, I can imagine that Zachariah and Elizabeth would tell the story of the encounter with the Angel, over and over to John. "This is the story about who you are and about what God has called you to do." What child doesn't love hearing the story about how their parents felt when they were born? About all the things that happened.

So the first thing we can see in scripture about the interplay between peace and acceptance is about "knowing our role". John's parents were told, before he was even conceived, what role he would play in the Kingdom of God. "He will go ahead of the Lord with the spirit and power that Elijah had." John knew what his calling was, the role that he was supposed to play, and he lived into it. He didn't try to improve on his instructions, he didn't say, "meh, that's not really what I want to do", he didn't wish for a

different role. Or maybe he did at different times feel or say things, but eventually, he accepted the work that was his to do and he played his part.

When I was in college, I minored in theater, and as a result was in a lot of plays.

Sometimes backstage, sometimes the lead role, sometimes a minor part. I did all sorts of things, both on the stage and behind the scenes. Our Director, Val Hiebert, would always tell the cast and crew, no matter what role or job that they had, that we were there to “Serve the Story”. Meaning our jobs, our efforts, our lines, our movements were all there to tell the bigger story, the message of the play. We were to serve the story. We were not there to try to pull on the audience’s heartstring, not there to ham it up for some laughs, not there to show off to our fellow actors - we were there to tell a story that was worth telling. We were there to serve the Story. And John the Baptist, like his parents Elizabeth and Zachariah before him, served the story, not themselves.

Tucked in with this idea of knowing, accepting and living out our role is submission.

Submission is another word that often rankles me, but in this case what I’m submission in the sense of accepting, more specifically, accepting who we are, as humanity. And who God is. To not conflate ourselves, our abilities, our perspectives with that of God. Now, historically, humans have REALLY not been great at this. Adam and Eve in their encounter with the snake are pulled into the idea of eating the fruit, because the snake says, “For then you shall be like God, knowing good from evil.” The original temptation- to be like God. We see people taking God’s plan into their own hands later in Genesis when God promises the childless Abraham that he will be the father of many nations,

and that his descendents will outnumber the stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore. His wife Sarah, unable to have children, decides she needs to find a way to bring this promise about, rather than wait for God to act. She gives Abraham her servant Hagar to give him children. We see it again, when Israel tells God they don't want him to be their King, give us a real, human King like all the other nations! When God's plan is slow to come to fruition, or even when God's plan doesn't look like we want it to or what we hope for, the human temptation is to take that into our own hands. I was talking recently with another pastor and she said something that really struck me, she said, "I'm trying to remember not to take over the job of the Holy Spirit." Oooo. I felt that one. We, and maybe especially those of us who are in ministry, need to remember what is ours to hold and what is not. And instead lean into trusting the God who knows the beginning from the end. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Returning now to the story of John the Baptist. John accepted what his role was and he lived into it. But the people, the crowds of Israelites who came to him, often wanted him to be more. In Luke 3:7-18, we read this story: John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up

children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

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The people wanted John to be something more, and wondered if he could be the Messiah. This wild man, who spoke as the Old Testament prophets had. Just as John accepted his role and lived into it, John didn’t try to be something he wasn’t, he didn’t

allow pride to overcome his ministry. His ministry was one of preparation, one of paving the road to Peace in Jesus.

In the life of a person of faith, and indeed in my own pastoral ministry, pride and doubt feel like two sides of the same coin. The ditch on either side of the road. I once had someone in MCSask say to me, "I wish all the pastors were like you." Nope. Nope. Nope. I know they meant it as a compliment, but I've seen what pride can do to a pastor and to their church. Or I'll experience doubt, my internal critic, saying, "Someone could do a much better job with this situation."

I remember something a former pastor of mine said to me, as I was first considering getting into ministry. He said, "Emily, a Pastor's job to teach, pray, and love a church. It's the Lord's job to lead the church." Hearing that was such a relief because it reminded me of what my job is, and what God's job is.

Like John the Baptist, our acceptance of being faithful in whatever God has called to is a path to Peace. Ministry. Grandparenting. Farming. Missions. Being a bank teller or a bus driver. Further, it's a path of showing others the Peace of Jesus. Our job is not to ensure the Peace of Jesus in the lives of others, it's our job to be faithful to preparing the way for the Peace of Jesus to come.

Finally, I think there is great value in taking the long view, of accepting that we are building a Kingdom that we may never see in our lifetimes. Because we serve the God

who knows the beginning from the end, we can entrust our labours to his good purposes. Our labours are not in vain.

I met with my Pastor Peer group this week, and Jeanette Hanson is in my group. She's in charge of the International Witness Workers Program with Mennonite Church Canada. She told us about her recent trip to China, which she described as very difficult. About a decade ago, China had a big openness to churches providing social services in their communities, to the point that the government paid some churches to set up and run these programs. Now, with a shift in political culture and leadership, the government is cracking down on these programs. Angry that the programs are so closely identified with churches and their leaders. Pastors are going to jail over this. She made some hard goodbyes on her China trip. When I asked her how the leadership is handling this, or making sense of this, she said the leadership is very philosophical about it all, "Yes, we've seen this before, and it'll shift again to something better, maybe not in our lifetime, but it will." I was struck by the acceptance...or how the whims of the government don't mean much to them. They're doing God's work, and they'll continue to do so, no matter how easy (or hard) the government makes it on them. To labour, faithfully, for a future that we ourselves won't get to see, is a peaceful perspective.

In closing, Sisters and Brothers, Jesus invites us to the Peace he offers. And we can prepare the way for peace in our lives, church, and the world because we know that God is God, and we are not. As hard as that truth feels someday, it is a good truth, that we can build our lives upon.