

A Season of Peace Sermon Series
Extending Peace
Hebrews 13:1-3, Romans 12:13-21
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We have been talking about peace and peace making for a few weeks now, and our sermon series continues today. When I think about peacemaking, most often I tend to first think about it as a reactive response, and we have talked about it in those terms so far. Last week, for example, we were challenged by the “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” passage which challenges us to think about what we do and how we respond *after* someone has done something to hurt or offend us first. That is one part of peacemaking, but peacemaking isn’t always and only about *reacting* in ways that can break a cycle of violence or in a way that might diffuse tension. Making and promoting peace can, and often is, also accomplished with *proactive* actions and behaviors. A proactive peacemaking action could be using a gentle tone of voice when you speak to people rather than a confrontational or exasperated tone, for example. I try to encourage my children to practice this one because I’ve noticed that fights are much more likely to erupt when someone yells “Get out of my room!” instead of calmly and gently asking, “Could you please leave?” Tone of voice makes a difference. Today the Scriptures point us to another proactive behavior that can be very helpful as we try to create and share peace and that is the practice of hospitality.

Hospitality is a wonderful thing - especially when you’re on the receiving end of it. There is nothing like being the guest of someone who has the gift of hospitality. Hospitable people are good at anticipating your needs and your desires and as they attend to you, you get the feeling that they actually enjoy and take pleasure in serving you. You all have probably been on the receiving end of someone’s hospitality so you can see how showing it can be a way of extending peace. As a result of hospitality, we feel loved and cared for and we feel the satisfaction and sense of security that comes from having our needs met. There were two times in my life during the years when I was preparing for ministry, when I did internships in churches and there were families in those two different churches who showed great hospitality to me. Both families hosted me as if I was a member of their own households and they provided the essentials of food

and shelter but also friendship. As you would expect, I didn't feel like these people were my enemies and I didn't feel like I needed to attack them or defend myself against them. Instead, their hospitality created conditions for peace. I had peace in knowing that I wasn't going to go hungry and that I'd have a place to sleep, and our relationship with each other was peaceful.

So, you can see how hospitality and peacemaking go hand in hand, and it seems like a nice, easy, proactive peacemaking action that we can all easily embrace. Practice welcoming others. Be sensitive and attentive to the people's needs. Be generous as you are able. And it *is* usually pretty easy to show hospitality to the people who we know and love, but in our Scripture readings this morning we are challenged to take this action to a next and more challenging level. We'll hear first the reading from Hebrews and second the reading from Romans.

Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God¹ for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In both of these passages, the authors are talking to Christians about how to love others - others being other Christians, but also others who may be outside of the circle of their particular Christian fellowship. In the passage from Romans, just a few verses earlier in verse 9, Paul says, love must be *genuine*. NT Wright says love must be *real* in his translation of the Greek, and then he talks about different ways to make love real. Both authors tell

their Christian friends that one of the ways that they can make love real is by showing hospitality. One thing to note is that when these authors speak about showing hospitality, they weren't just talking about having someone over for a nice dinner. There was no such thing as a Holiday Inn Express at the time, and it wasn't uncommon for travelers to have to rely on the hospitality of regular people. Showing hospitality to people passing through or to the poor and downtrodden was very much about meeting real physical needs. Paul and the author of Hebrews are telling their Christian friends to make love real by showing hospitality, but not just to each other - the people that they know, and have things in common with, and feel like they can trust. They are told to show hospitality to *strangers*, and in the Romans passage, Paul even says to take care of the needs of your enemies. Here is where showing hospitality may become a more difficult action to embrace than we first thought because the thing about strangers is that they can be *strange*, and the thing about enemies is that they don't seem deserving of or worthy of our kindness.

It is not hard to come up with reasons to withhold hospitality from the kind of people that the Scriptures refer to here. Our self-preservation instinct tells us that it's too risky and dangerous to extend ourselves to people who we don't know. The scarcity mindset tells us that there won't be enough if we're too generous. Fear of the unfamiliar and unknown makes us wonder if we can trust the stranger who is different from us. To be sure, there are times when we need to listen to the fear instinct or the self-preservation instinct, and yet, the Word still challenges us to be hospitable to strangers and even our enemies and that is because the Spirit chooses to work in and through the hospitable works of God's people. We don't know for sure what God might do when you or I make love real by showing hospitality to strangers, but we can find some examples in Scripture of what God has done in the past which might be the kinds of things that God would do again if we practice hospitality in obedience to the Spirit's leading. Let's consider some examples.

Verse 2 from the reading in Hebrews mentions people who entertained angels without knowing it which is a reference to the story in Genesis 18 about Abraham showing hospitality to 3 strangers. In the heat of the day, Abraham looks out and sees 3 men he doesn't know and goes out to greet them and invites them to come rest under his tree, and to have some water and wash their feet, and he has food prepared for them. Abraham is generous with the strangers and takes care of their needs not because he wants to get something from them in return or because he is trying to win them over for some reason. He was just doing what God's word instructs us

to do, and on this occasion, when he did, God delivered an important message to Abraham through the unexpected visitors. They told him that Sarah was going to have a baby. If God could deliver a message to Abraham through the strangers that he cared for, maybe that is something that God would like to do for us. Opening our hearts, or homes, or lives to someone new and strange can be a way of opening our hearts to God in a new and different way and when we do that, we might hear something that we haven't heard before.

In the book of Ruth, we find another example of God meeting people and working through human hospitality. Ruth shows hospitality to her mother-in-law, Naomi, when she pledges to stay with Naomi as her helper and companion after they are both left as widows. The two women returned to Bethlehem in Judah, and soon Ruth caught the attention of a man named Boaz. She was not from Judah like Naomi, but even though she was a foreigner, Boaz showed hospitality to Ruth and allowed her to glean in his fields, and ultimately, he married her. Both Ruth and Boaz practiced hospitality and through their actions, God worked not only to meet basic human needs, but new relationships were also formed across national, ethnic, and religious lines. If God could meet basic human needs and bring people of different backgrounds, and cultures, and religions into relationship with each other through the hospitable acts of Ruth and Boaz, maybe that is something that God would like to do still for us and through us. Good relationships are important for building peace.

This is the philosophy behind a program that our session has signed on to called OneCOP which stands for One Congregation One Precinct. A congregation like ours is connected to officers in our local precinct so that we can work together on activities in our neighborhood that allow citizens and our law enforcement officers to build relationships that build trust. Where that trust has eroded, we've seen the results, and this program is a proactive approach to addressing and trying to resolve those tensions. Through this program, we have the opportunity to be hospitable by hosting events that bring the police and members of our community together.

Jumping forward now to the New Testament, who better to look at than Jesus for an example. Jesus modeled hospitality in his actions of welcoming strangers and eating with tax collectors and sinners. In John 4 he really went out on a limb when he spoke to the woman at the well who was someone he shouldn't have been talking to according to the rules because she was both a woman and a Samaritan. Jesus shared grace and truth with people who needed those things but were deemed unworthy to receive them. If God could minister to strangers and outcasts who needed to receive grace and

truth through the hospitality of Jesus, maybe that is something that God would still like to do through us. We *are* the Body of Christ, and when we are willing to reach across barriers and reach out to people whom others want to avoid, we may become the vessels through which Jesus makes himself known and delivers his peace to others.

We are challenged then, today, to be proactive peacemakers by showing hospitality – not just to our friends but to those who are different, and strange, and maybe even a little scary to us. The exhortation does present us with a challenge because “stranger danger” is real. We need to acknowledge that and rely on the Holy Spirit to be our guide, but at the same time we are invited today to acknowledge that God also calls us to extend hospitality to strangers. We are invited to stop making excuses if we do make them, and we’re invited to let the Spirit search us and set us free from unholy fears, or stereotypes, or biases that have gotten in the way of obedience. We are invited to open our eyes a little wider and to pay closer attention to the strangers, or the outcasts, or even the enemies who are right in front of us and to consider if we haven’t before how we might be proactive peacemakers by showing hospitality. We *can* move out of our comfort zones. We can reach out to and embrace people who we never thought we could or ever would have wanted to, and we can trust that just as God has worked in and through the hospitality of God’s people in the past, God will do it again. Amen.