

**"For the Good of All"**

**A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr**

**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – July 3, 2022**

**Please Read:**

**Galatians 6:7-16**

**Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**

Tomorrow, we celebrate our national Independence. It's a good time to reflect on freedom and what it means for us as Christians. Last week I talked about freedom *from* and freedom *for*. This weekend, I think we should be celebrating our *interdependence* in 2022 as much as our *independence* back in 1776! The contemporary world is connected and relational. I recently heard a politician say we need to move from the party of *me* to the party of *we*. Now, more than ever, right?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus sends out seventy disciples two by two to share the healing power of the Living God. They are sent with a simple message of peace. Jesus commands them, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person..."

Most of you probably heard a sermon or two on peace. Peace is a central theme in the Bible, the word being used in some form *450 times*! In our Gospel text, the Greek word *εἰρήνη* for "peace," comes from the verb *εἰρω*, meaning "to join," or *to put together, unify, or make whole*. The Hebrew sense of the word *shalom* is about restoration; making that which is broken or separated whole, one, reconciled. I have always appreciated Cornelius Plantinga's definition of *shalom*: "The way it's supposed to be."<sup>1</sup>

Part of what Luke is getting at in the way he tells this story is God's *universal peace project*. Jesus sends out *70* disciples. The number *70* is symbolic and hints at the genealogy of the nations in Genesis, (chapter 10). *70* names are listed there to denote all the tribes of the earth. The good news is about the Kingdom of God, and a mission of *cosmic* dimensions. God's peace is for the whole world. It's *for the good of all!*

Jesus sends his followers *into peoples' homes*. It's an important detail. The gospel's context is *relational*, and it means moving closer to where people really live. There are interesting instructions Jesus gives; to take no purse (peace is not for profit or personal gain), do not take a backpack (travel light, keep it simple), and don't get side-tracked with small talk along the way ("The main thing, is to keep the main thing, the main thing!"). But the most provocative instruction for a Jewish audience is when Jesus says to *eat whatever is put in front of you*. Jewish dietary laws were secondary to Jesus' mercy ministry. In other words, religious *prescription* will always be subordinate to Kingdom *proclamation*. Jesus sends his disciples out with the mission to share God's peace with all people, even those who would have been outsiders and shunned by religious legalists...

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 7.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the peace of God requires a willingness to become vulnerable. Jesus warns his disciples that there are some people who will reject peace. That is evident in our world today, whether in Moscow or Washington. Too many forget how easy it is to destroy, but so hard to build. It can take seconds to *deconstruct* what took centuries to *construct*.

As Luke tells it, the disciples experienced a heady joy in physical healings, a *temporary* manifestation of God's peace. They also learned that confessing Jesus as Lord may secure a *lasting* peace, but also puts you into conflict with the powers and principalities of this world.

Christian community is the target of Paul's teaching, but for the larger purpose of becoming better agents of transformation for the Kingdom of God. Paul says that we are to "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Here in Galatians is the only place in Scripture where we find this phrase "the law of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Jesus summarized the Mosaic law as loving God and loving your neighbor. Paul summarizes the law of Christ: "bear one another's burdens."

What does that really mean? The first step in fulfilling the law of Christ means being willing to enter into community. Disciples of Jesus are sent as missionaries to the world, but we are also called to be in familial relationship. This means we accept the good news that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are given a new identity and status as beloved children of God... We are part of God's family. Calling one another *brother* or *sister* in the church is not ethnic slang; *it is good theology!* It's *Kingdom sociology!* That is the context in which this teaching on the law of Christ is given: When Paul says, "bear one another's burdens," this is training for the real work out there. He goes on to write that "whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...

So, we practice loving one another in the church so that we will be more loving people in the world. This is always easier than it sounds. Mike Yaconelli was a famous Youth Ministry guru I had the privilege of working with on an international youth conference in Spain once upon a time. I loved his book, *Messy Spirituality*, and the subtitle: "*God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People.*" If it's Christian spirituality, it's going to be messy spirituality, because it's going to involve being in relationships with imperfect people. It means allowing Christ to deal with the good, the bad and the ugly of our lives. G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "The Church is justified, not because her children do *not* sin, but because they do."<sup>3</sup>

Notice that Paul, immediately after talking about the law of Christ, warns, "For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves!" There is no room for arrogance or haughtiness in the family. By definition, you come into the family in

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<sup>2</sup> There is also a parenthetical usage of this term in I Corinthians 9:21.

<sup>3</sup> John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 135.

humility, on your knees. Christian community begins with anyone willing to pray the famous Jesus Prayer: “*Lord Jesus, have mercy on me!*”

We are all carrying burdens... but we’re carrying burdens that at times, if we are honest, we just can’t carry alone. So, we pursue more honest relationships in the church, so we get to know what burdens our brothers and sisters are carrying; burdens like grief, loneliness, anger, addictions, depression, etc. Then we need to figure out how to support one another. We can only give and receive from one another *in* community if we know that we are loved *by* the community.

*Authentic community, loving one another, is a gift of God’s grace...* I may have told you this story before, but it’s important. I had been finishing out the walk-out basement of our home in Colorado with my dad. We framed walls, finished plumbing and electrical work, but Dad had to return home and the school year was starting, which meant a lot of my friends were going to be very busy and couldn’t help me finish putting up the sheet rock. There was no way I could finish this job alone. I had mentioned it to some of my friends, and they all said, “Yeah, sure I can help”... *but no one showed up*. Frankly, I was feeling exhausted, disappointed and discouraged.

One of the elders in our church, Jim, showed up with his wife and son. They just came, unannounced, with all of their tools and said, “Let’s get to work!” I was amazed. Jim was a busy man. He was a CEO and had plenty to do. But he kept showing up until the job was done. I’ll never forget Jim’s expression of love and support when I really needed it. We became friends, and the unfinished basement became a metaphor for my spiritual life. Jim became my spiritual mentor. Because he helped me with the basement of my house, I listened to what he said about the basement of my life.

Paul closes the passage reminding us that it’s all about a “new creation.” That works on the individual level, but results in a new world of relationships that are infused with God’s grace, with the love and justice of Jesus. We are not bound by the old cosmos, living according to the flesh. We are called live according to the Spirit and the reordering of our priorities, so we reflect the new creation order of the Kingdom of God.

There was a cartoon in *The New Yorker* that depicted a seasoned minister in full liturgical regalia with his arm on the shoulder of his young assistant at the church door. “Remember, Higgins,” the veteran counseled, “There are two subjects studiously to be avoided in the church: “politics and religion!”

In light of the recent political hailstorm with the Supreme Court decisions, whatever our feelings may be, it’s important to remember God’s politics are not about us and them, about left or right, about red or blue. No, because of the way of Jesus, we are called to work *for the good of all*.

It's baked into our nation's founding documents, "that all... are created with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We pledge to do our part to build a nation *with liberty and justice for all*.

So, on this *Independence Day* weekend, I charge you, as the first disciples did, to remember and celebrate our *interdependence*. Come to the table and receive the grace that transforms the messiness of our lives. Share the peace of Christ by showing up and saying, "Let's get to work!" taking action, imaginative compassion, in and out of the basement to share in Christ's wholeness and healing. And when some reject peace, shake it off and move on. Go out again and again to proclaim in word and deed the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. And may you return with joy, knowing you are sharing in the peace of Christ, fulfilling the law of Christ, working for the good of all...

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*