

## “Owning a Peace of God”

Sermon by Ron Theile



*John 3:1-17*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I would like to thank my fellow lay speakers for taking part in this morning’s worship service. Lay Speakers are an important ministry within the United Methodist Church connection. There are classes that teach an individual how to use their personal resources to better their congregations and to spiritually improve themselves. A special thanks to Mary Crawford, Chris Reagh, Wynn Battig, Bee Campbell, Ben Ing, Mike Olsson and Rose Kujawa.

Our Pastoral and administrative staff, as well as everyone in this sanctuary wish each and every father, stepfather, guardian and mentor a very happy Father’s Day.

And finally, each time it is Lay Speaker Sunday, it is a good time to think about and give thanks to our pastoral staff who plans and carries out the worship service. David Bremer and myself were talking about what it takes to write a sermon. For myself, I can research, meditate, think, pray and write a sermon with one hour of work for each minute of sermon. Now, if Patricia preached 48 weeks a year for 42 years, she will have written 1616 sermons. That is a conservative estimate. Patricia must do this and be the equivalent of a CEO of a multi-million dollar corporation. Now, if you are wondering what Patricia does during the week, you having something to think about. So, we are reminded how much work and planning go into a meaningful service for us all. So, I speak for all of us in thanking our pastoral and, just as importantly, the administration staff for all the work that they do. Hopefully, I have not scared off our associate pastors.

I have a great long-term memory. Don’t ask me what I did yesterday or what I had for dinner the night before, but ask me what the farmhouse was like when I was a toddler and I can give you an exact description of not only that house but the farm as well.

My earliest memory is of that farm. I remember well climbing out of bed from under a flowered quilt and looking out at the Courtyard between the house and the barn. There was a light over the large doors leading to the barn. It was so quiet. Everything in its place. Nothing moved. It is such a peaceful memory.

I also have a special memory of being at Sunday school and the Sunday school teacher, who was old and frail and walked using wooden crutches, would softly tell Bible stories. Little Ronnie sitting in the front row by myself, listening to her soft voice, told the story the way a child would understand. It felt so peaceful. If I was lucky on that Sunday, I would take the Sunday school attendance to the office and can remember soft summer breezes coming through the windows and the congregation’s chorus of hymns coming from the open stain glass windows of the church. Everything was right with the world I was aware of. It was perfect peace.

These memories of peace were brought to me by my family, my friends and my church. I also came to believe that they are also a gift from God.

The opposite of these beautiful memories are those memories that are better served up as nightmares. I can also remember my first church camp experience. Mom and dad said I would be going to camp but I found it unusual that when mom was packing my bag she was putting in slacks and shirts with collars. Funny, I thought, from the stories I heard from my friends, these clothes wouldn’t be any good at the camp where I *thought* I was going. I remember meeting the counselors. The older one wore a suit and the younger one wore a sport coat with an open collar. I remember the trampoline on that first day of camp and the fact that I could not use it because I could not get through the older kids. But what I recall, as if it was yesterday, was the first morning. We were led into a large assembly Hall and there I gazed upon a 35 foot wide by 20 foot tall painting of hell. I was confused and scared as I gazed upon the evil little pixies submitting their victims to every conceivable torture. We were in that hall for hours each day. It was yelled, “Sin is what these souls committed that are in this eternal fire and torture. Sin is the root of all evil everywhere in creation.” I was alone and scared. I was not so afraid of sin, as I was afraid of God.

My salvation came from an old, frail, soft-spoken Sunday School teacher who used wooden crutches. I was cutting through my old Sunday school class and she was in there alone. She greeted me, held both my hands, and ask me to sit down. She simply asked “how are you?” I told her I was afraid all the time and why that was so. I remember how she looked in my eyes and with that gentle voice calmed my fears. The relief was overwhelming. I had finally found peace once again.

These examples are given when life is much simpler as a child. As we progress through life, things become more complicated. As a teacher of middle school students, I see how complicated things can get while *still* at a young age. Children being bullied, children blaming themselves for

their parents' divorce, children's sisters and brothers being gunned down, children's family members taken from them by drug abuse and a girl named Alexandria having her father being gunned down on his motorcycle while on the 210 freeway. Peace seems to be completely out of reach. It seems the older we get, the more life is complicated, disturbing, emotionally draining. Peace *still* seems as though it is out of reach. The Bible even warns us so. Job in the Old Testament said it best. "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward." Even Jesus warned in John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble." Life is a journey that begins with birth and ends with death that begins yet another journey. An eternal journey. But, while we are here on this earth, which road do we turn onto to begin walking toward that moment of reprieve? What path do we take to find the kind of peace you get sitting on the bank of a slow moving river? What path do we take to find the kind of peace you get by sitting on the beach of a smooth ocean where waves rhythmically lap on the shoreline as the sun sets on the horizon? Which road do we take that will lead to peace? I imagine this crossroad looking like the middle of a train yard. In the distance there are tracks that lead to the horizon. But, there is a massive number of switches we must pass through to get to only one of those tracks we see in the distance. We must traverse the unknown. As my favorite hymn says, we must traverse many dangers. We must traverse toil. We must traverse snares.

To make it to that place of peace, we need a partner. God understands our fear of the unknown. God realizes that we may be in a situation that we've never passed through before and we're afraid. It may be family problems. Maybe you or someone you know in your family or a friend has just been diagnosed with an illness. There are roads that we have never been down before and we don't know which way to go or what to do. We must have *faith* that God will guide the way.

In the Bible, Joshua's life was unpredictable and full of unknowns much like yours and mine. Yet, he successfully resisted fear by keeping his focus on God rather than the events surrounding him. Just as God guided the Israelites through an unknown territory, He will guide you and me too. When we come to a place we've never passed through before, God is always present to help us.

The Book of Isaiah offers us these comforting words, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

The perfect metaphor for the challenges we face today and the faith we must maintain can be found in Matthew 8 which tells us that Jesus gets into a boat and his disciples follow him. And it reads, "And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

I think it is safe to say that when we face turmoil in our lives, when we are looking for a different path or when we are looking for solutions, we pray for God, through Jesus Christ our Savior, to show us the light by which we can find resolution and peace in our lives.

However, we can do even more. If you are thinking of, "God helps those who help themselves" that people think comes from the Bible, you would look and never find it in that sacred book. This saying is mostly attributed to Benjamin Franklin. This is not bad advice but the Bible actually goes in the opposite direction. The Bible says that God helps those who cannot help themselves. We look again to the Book of Matthew to find that God's love and caring are delivered to those who need it by God's own creatures here on earth. It reads, "*Aqain I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*" We can learn aspects of God's heart through others that we simply can't learn alone. In relationship with others we learn about God's heart for unity, grace and love in new and powerful ways. As a community of faith, we encounter people with various resources, perspectives, and experiences that are different from our own. And in our community of faith, we discover God's heart to use for the building up, healing, and love for others as well as ourselves.

God wants us to give ourselves fully to those around us. He longs to use us for that healing and building up of others. Giving ourselves gives us the opportunity to be used by God to be built up in love with a group of believers. It positions us to receive help from fellow believers who are pursuing the same path to peace. And it equips us to pursue freedom and life in areas where we might not have gotten victory without the help of others.

We must pursue wholehearted community today, not because fellow believers are perfect, but because we, as imperfect children of God, need help from fellow imperfect children to encounter the fullness of abundant life God intends for us. We should have grace for others. Love when you are unloved. Help when no one else will. Build up others and ourselves, that Jesus loves, that the world might better know the loving and available God we serve.

As for Alexandria whose father was gunned down on the 210 freeway, she texted me at 4:30 in the morning with, "Help me, my daddy died." The next morning I was huddled with my bellringers trying to figure out the best way to help Alex when she walked into the bell room. As she approached us I said she should be with her family for their love and support. She looked at us and said, "I am."

And, as for that frightened little boy who took a shortcut through his old Sunday school room and was stopped by an old, frail, Sunday school teacher who used wooden crutches, he was told 10 words that he has never forgotten by this person who was a conduit of God's love and grace. I pass these 10 words on to you as someone in this sanctuary may need to hear them right now. And if not, we should take these words and, as a conduit of God's love and grace, pass them on to those who might need to hear them. Those words were, "I just happen to know God loves you very much."

Amen