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The gift of peace  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
March 5, 2023  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 3:1-17 and James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Relax, I know. You are all expecting a boring sermon today. I've been in a pulpit for a long time, but when I hear that the theme of a reflection is "peace" I myself still get flashbacks of sitting in a pew and bracing myself for the most boring, bland, and useless message imaginable.

[image: chatgpt]

I of course do not want to bore you today. But just in case I do, I want to tell you that a portion of the sermon today was created by the artificial intelligence tool called "ChatGPT". If you find yourself being bored, you can at least try to figure out which part of this reflection came from the AI tool. You're welcome!

[image: dandelion]

I don't know about you, but I figure I would have liked Nicodemus. Nicodemus is looking for something, and so he comes to Jesus. Tradition tells us that Nicodemus came at night so that his peers would not know about his visit. But whatever the reason, Nicodemus is being strategic. And I like that. Interestingly, in our reading today Nicodemus does not tell Jesus what he is looking for. And Jesus does not seem interested in what Nicodemus wants anyway. Perhaps Nicodemus was following up with Jesus and responding to a teaching that Jesus had recently given. In any case, we know that the author did not think that we needed to understand the wider context. Which is too bad, because for us, the story is very incomplete. We seem to have been dumped into the middle of an ongoing story without a teaser.

But perhaps that does not matter anyway. The teaching opens up the metaphor of where people are "born from". And the options are to be born "from above", or not. We can all be relieved that the second option is not being born "from below". In John's mind, one is either born "from above", ... or not. And John gives another lens to the metaphor when he explains that being born "from above" and being born "of the spirit" are the

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same thing.

[image:syncretism book]

Given the history of the creation of the Christian Church, this is not surprising. Jesus and all his friends were Jewish. After Jesus died, people who followed Jesus were part of a movement called “the way” which was a sect within Judaism. Over time, the wider Jewish community started to distance themselves from that sect. And over time, that sect which began within Judaism moved outside of the bounds of Judaism. It became its own religion. And early Christianity was influenced by many groups and cultures. They borrowed much from Judaism of course. But they were also heavily influenced by Roman, Greek, Phoenician, and other cultures, as well as from a variety of groups known today as “mystery cults”. Christianity as we know it did not simply grow out of a single vision of Jesus. Christianity is a product of syncretism: the merging or assimilation of several discrete traditions, rituals, and values. And that assimilation still happens today.

[image: syncretism]

Some people find this idea disturbing. They think that we are watering down the Christian faith by allowing other perspectives to engage. But Jesus actually recommended it himself. In John 16, Jesus was speaking to his disciples, and said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all the truth; for it will not speak on its own, but will speak whatever it hears, and will declare to you the things that are to come.” Jesus acknowledged that his teachings were not complete. Christians need to keep looking for answers - led by the spirit of course. “Born of the Spirit” opens many doors, including listening to our history, our society, and our non-Christian neighbours.

Jesus also practiced syncretism himself. During the last supper with his disciples, Jesus took passover foods and re-purposed them, declaring that the bread represented his body, and the wine represented his blood. Jesus took an existing tradition - a passover meal - and redefined it to be relevant in a new way. That’s syncretism in action. Jesus did that himself, so we should not fear it.

[image: religious syncretism]

When John said that people had to come to God through Jesus, he was advertising

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for new members. He was trying to attract converts. John was selling Christianity as the new religion on the block. Because Christianity was so new, nobody had been born into it directly. In those days, everyone was a convert! The line, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through the Son” was a sales pitch designed to attract new converts.

Which is why the story is a bit harder to understand today. Because today most (not all) Christians were born into Christianity. Today, we live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith, multi-religion world. In other words, quite a lot like the world of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. 2000 years ago, Christianity was embracing other perspectives as it created its own identity. And we are invited to do the same in order for Christianity to remain relevant for today’s problems and issues.

John spoke of being “born from above” and “born of the spirit” as the same thing. James has his own lens on this, referring to the same thing as being “born of wisdom”. And James nicely ties this in with the theme of peace.

But James makes an interesting move. He declares that some wisdom “comes from above”. And further that the wisdom that does not come from above is unspiritual and devilish. He even gives us a convenient list.

[image: list below - wisdom from above or from the devil]

Wisdom that comes from the devil includes:

- Envy
- Selfish ambition
- Boastfulness
- Un-truthfulness
- Disorder
- Wickedness of every kind

Wisdom that comes from above includes:

- Gentleness
- Purity
- Peaceable
- Willingness to yield

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- Full of mercy
  - Without partiality
  - Without hypocrisy

What do you think of those two lists? Which of those lists reminds you of your own life? What world do you want to live in? I prefer the “wisdom from above” side. That is the side that leads to inner peace.

When I was younger, I assumed that everyone wanted to live in peace. Obviously, we do not have perfect control over our lives. We often end up dealing with issues like aging and medical conditions that we do not always appreciate. But when we consider the parts of our own lives where we have control, like our own attitudes, surely we all want to live peaceful lives, right?

One of the things I have learned by engaging in professional ministry is that my early assumption was in fact wrong. There are people - even in this church - who are not working to create lives of peace for themselves. There are people who consciously and unconsciously make decisions that actually lead themselves away from peace.

Take a look at the “wisdom from the devil” list again. Does that remind you of anyone? That list matches very well people who like to control other people. And trying to control other people is a recipe for never finding inner peace. I suppose I should stop using this image sometime,

[image: Donald trump angry]

but Donald Trump was the poster child for his need to exert control on other people. This manifested itself most frequently as anger. His anger was in fact a mask for his own fears and insecurities. Trump presents himself as a strong, powerful man - declaring himself to be the most powerful man on the planet. Even declaring himself to be second only to Jesus. But in reality, emotionally he is a scared little boy. A pitiful and weak individual who failed to get the love he needed as a child.

Dr John Zinner, a psychologist who studied Trump said, “The mental condition [Trump] suffers most from is formally known as a severe instance of narcissistic personality disorder. ... the disorder is the failure in childhood and beyond to develop an inner sense of worth or self-esteem, that makes one’s worth entirely dependent upon

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admiration from others”<sup>1</sup>. That is not a recipe for inner peace. And this photo of Trump does not show a man at peace, that’s for sure.

[image: someone who needs control]

People who need to exert control over others are always victims of their own insecurities and fears. And that is why they feel the need for control. Often something happened to these people in their past that they could not control. And therefore they grow up thinking that if they only had enough control, their lives would be better. So they cannot compromise. They have to have things go their way. These people live their lives with the characteristics that James calls “born from the devil”. And in fact those people are be-deviled by their own past. A past that they themselves are unwilling to let go of.

But I want all of us to live into the gift of inner peace during Lent this year. How do we achieve that?

“[Inner] Peace is a state of mind and a way of living that brings harmony and tranquility to our lives. [Peace] is about having a sense of inner calm and contentment, even in the face of adversity. When we have peace in our hearts, we are better equipped to deal with the challenges that life throws at us.

But peace is not just an individual pursuit. It is something that we need to cultivate in our relationships with others as well. When we treat others with kindness and respect, we create an environment of peace and harmony. When we listen to others with an open heart and seek to understand their perspectives, we foster peace and understanding.

And it is not just about our relationships with those who are close to us. We must also extend our efforts to those who are different from us. ... [W]hen we reach out to those who are different from us - whether they are of a different race, religion, or nationality - we are building bridges of understanding and creating a more peaceful world.”<sup>2</sup>

So how do we find a better sense of inner peace during Lent? Well, there are lots

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-narcissistic-personality-disorder-mary-trump-john-zinner-bandy-x-lee-a9665856.html>

<sup>2</sup> Text written by AI platform ChatGPT in response to the question “write a sermon on peace”. It has been adapted to use inclusive language for God.

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of ways. But today, I want to lift up the fact that many of us have to put up with controlling people in our lives. And that is a challenge because controlling people are using the “wisdom from the devil” side of the list. I have even been surprised by how many controlling people there are in this congregation.

So what do we do about people who want to exert control over us? How do we create a spirit of inner peace? Well, we just need to use the wisdom from above list.

[image: control is weakness]

But first, some of you listening to me are controlling people yourselves. To you, I say that I honestly hope that you will find inner peace during Lent. Finding peace requires that you put some work into figuring out what it is that leads to your low self-esteem and causes you to need to externalize your sense of worth. Controlling behaviour will never lead to peace. It will take you away from peace. The church is here to help. I am here to help. Just reach out to me. Participate in our healing circles. But the first step is to accept that controlling behaviour is inappropriate in a church and to realize that you need help.

[image: find inner peace]

And for all of us ... how do we find inner peace when we find that we need to live with controlling people in our lives?

- The main secret is to be our authentic selves. We need to set boundaries as to what sorts of behaviours we will and will not tolerate. This starts by considering what it is we need in order to feel safe and valued in our relationships.
- Then, we need to communicate our boundaries to others in assertive and loving ways. Use “I” statements to express your feelings and needs clearly.
- Do not engage in arguments. Be prepared to walk away if necessary.
- “Remember that setting personal boundaries can take time and practice. Be patient with yourself, and don't be afraid to adjust your boundaries as needed. By setting clear boundaries and communicating them effectively, you can maintain your well-being and feel more empowered in your relationships and interactions with others.”<sup>3</sup> Personal boundaries are an essential ingredient to creating a life of inner

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<sup>3</sup> More words of wisdom from ChatGPT.

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peace.

- And we need to make space in our lives for self-care. Dealing with controlling people is emotionally draining. Meditate, come to our drum circle, walk in the woods, pray, do what helps you find peace.
- And finally, we need to acknowledge that we deserve peace. We all deserve inner peace.

[image: dandelion shedding]

I encourage us all to reflect on this image. An image of a dandelion shedding its seeds in the wind. For me, it is an image of inner peace. The shedding of seeds for me is a reminder that we need to let go of things in our lives that are holding us back. We need to let go of past grudges, we need to embrace our present.

And for the dandelion, as it lets go of its seeds, those seeds drift in the winds to places unknown and cause new life to emerge. It's the same thing with us. Let go of the things that are holding you back and you will see new life emerge in new and unexpected sways. That is what inner peace is all about.

This church can be a place that we help each other find inner peace. We are worth it. You are worth it. Peace be with you.

Amen.