
The gift of peace
Chapel in the Park United Church
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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, and when I hear that the theme of a reflection is "peace" I still get flashbacks of sitting in a pew and bracing myself for the most boring, bland, and useless message imaginable. Peace is obviously a worthwhile objective. But talking about peace can put us right to sleep.

Consider this. There are no stories in the Bible about people living in peace. We have quite a few stories saying that after we do something - like taking someone else's land - we will live in peace. But there are no stories about people actually living in peace. Perhaps because those stories would be boring.

Consider this. Museums mainly have exhibits that are about change and progress. Museums have exhibits on military conquests, and important inventions that changed how our societies work. The exhibits are important reminders of the struggles we have made to get to where we are today. But very few - if any - exhibits simply show people living in peace.

Consider this. Do you remember in the early days of the pandemic when everyone was confused and anxious? And schools were struggling to know how to adapt? There was a lot of tension between teachers and parents because they had to re-define the relationship between learning at school and learning at home when online learning became more important. I remember lots of parents being angry and anxious. But about 6 months into the pandemic I found a news article about one school where the teachers and the parents were working together in constructive ways. That's good news, right? I could not even finish reading the article because it was so boring. People getting along is great - if you are one of the people involved. But reading about someone else being peaceful was excruciatingly boring.

Perhaps peace is fundamentally a boring concept. I'll do my best to not be too

boring right now.

What do you think of Nicodemus? I think I would have liked him. 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 being given a recap.

But the story is interesting 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 same thing.

[image:syncretism book]

Given the history of the creation of the Christianity, 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. Over time, that sect which began within Judaism moved outside of the bounds of Judaism. It drew people from a wide variety of backgrounds. It became its own thing. Over time it became the religion we now call Christianity. 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 collectively as “mystery cults”. Christianity as we know it did not simply grow out of a single vision that came from Jesus. Nor did Christianity simply grow out of Judaism. Christianity is a product of syncretism: the merging or assimilation

of several discrete traditions, rituals, and values. And that syncretization has been ongoing ever since.

[image: syncretism]

Some people perhaps object to the idea that Christianity by definition opens itself to new ideas and new growth. But Jesus actually recommended this approach 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 it’s 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 both Christian and non-Christian neighbours. And of course - listening to each other.

Jesus actually practiced syncretism himself. During the last supper with his disciples, Jesus took passover food items 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 different way. That is syncretism in action. Jesus did that himself, so we should not fear it.

[image: religious syncretism]

Let’s just take a moment and put our minds back 2000 years. We will see both similarities and differences between reality then and our reality now.

The world of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago was a multi-cultural, multi-faith, multi-religious world. So in many ways, like our own world today. But there are two important differences - which may or may not be obvious.

One difference was that Christianity was creating itself at the time. And it did that by embracing a variety of perspectives and ideas. Creating itself to be relevant for the community of its day.

[image: bubble pack christianity]

Some people think of Christianity is if it came shrink-wrapped in its final form from Jesus himself. Perhaps in a blister pack with a price and a barcode. Unchanged and unchanging. But Christianity has never been a fixed thing, or even a single thing. And

Christianity has never had a final form that could be packaged.

The Reformation and Vatican II are both proof that Christianity has continued to evolve and change. Not to mention Liberation Theology, and the church's response to the Civil Rights movement, Women's rights, 2SLGBTQ+ rights, and so on.

That is one difference. But the other difference is really exciting. At least to a church geek like me. 2000 years ago, Christianity was a new thing. Which means that if you were in a Christian community, you and all of the other members were recent converts. Converts who brought their own rituals and ideas into the space. Imagine being in a congregation like that!

Whereas today, most - not all - Christians are born into the faith. I was born into Christianity, as were many of you. We sometimes forget that the words in the gospel were aimed at converts. The words promoted a small, developing religion. Whereas we sometimes pretend that the words support the status quo.

[image: is faith about defending the past, or creating a better future?]

Early Christians were trying to create a new future. Whereas today people sometimes speak about Christianity like we are defending the past. But the New Testament is about creating a new and better, evolving future. The New Testament was not written to defend the status quo. It was a challenge to the status quo.

So today - I invite us all to imagine hearing these words inviting us into a new and better future. And what is this new and better future going to look like? James provides part of the answer to that question.

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". 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

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- Boastfulness
 - Un-truthfulness
 - Disorder
 - Wickedness of every kind

Wisdom that comes from above includes:

- Gentleness
- Purity
- Peaceable
- Willingness to yield
- Full of mercy
- Without partiality
- Without hypocrisy

What do you think of those two lists? Which world do you want to live in? I prefer the “wisdom from above” side. I’m sure we all want to live in that world.

And that “wisdom that comes from above” list also happens to be a pretty good recipe for living in peace. But before we dive into discussing peace, I have a confession to make.

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 in peace, right?

One of the things I have learned by engaging in professional ministry is that my earlier assumption was in fact wrong. There are many people who are not actively working to create lives of peace for themselves. There are people who consciously or unconsciously make decisions that actually lead themselves away from peace. And I’ve met people who have told me that they actually prefer to live like that.

As one example, I was arguing - I mean having a discussion - with someone

online recently. And they told me that my idea of working for peace was delusional. They argued we should just use “divide and control” methods, because they are practical and they work. I invited the person to consider that living a life of peace might be more satisfying emotionally. In the end, I ended the conversation with a line that I often use. Particularly after a heated conversation. I always close off with “peace be with you”. They responded with “not much hope of that”. That person is choosing to live in ways that make peace impossible for themselves. My hope is that our conversation helped them realize that.

And I suspect that person is not alone. Take a look at the “wisdom from the devil” list. 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. Like my internet friend. People who live like that have constructed their life in a way they will struggle to ever find peace. And I am forced to consider that perhaps they are not interested in finding peace.

We can discuss these lists during our Lenten Discussion Group this week. And I’d invite us to reflect on whether or not people do actually want to live in peace. And perhaps during the discussion we can discuss whether or not peace sounds boring.

[image: dandelion shedding]

I want to close by inviting us to reflect on this image. An image of a dandelion shedding it’s 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 it’s seeds, those seeds drift in the winds to places unknown and cause new life to emerge. It’s the same thing with us. When we let go of the things that are holding us back and we will see new life emerge in new and unexpected ways.

And why are the seeds drifting off? It’s because of the wind - the pneuma - the spirit. This image also reminds me of opening ourselves to the ever-present wafting of the spirit that liberates us and continues to invite us into new life.

That is what inner peace is all about. And inner peace is a gift.

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

Amen.