
Peace
Chapel in the Park United Church
September 20, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Ephesians 2:14-22 and John 14:23-27

One again, the church calendar invites us to reflect on the topic of peace. Well, that sounds nice, doesn't it. That sounds so ... peaceful. Except that of course the word "peace" means different things to different people. And some people have told me that their sense of the word "peace" has changed for them - personally - as they have gotten older. Which is really interesting.

But clearly, peace is something worth discussing. And I hope that our different interpretations of the word peace bring out some good conversation over coffee time.

One way we understand peace is at a deeply personal level. One of our members is currently on a vacation and sent me this video clip. I believe the setting invoked peace for the vacationer. Here's the video. How does this make you feel?

[movie: sunset, waves, etc]

That beach scene I'm sure feels like a place for personal peace for many people. Being on your own, in a quiet place, with a sunset. And with the ripple of waves to remind us all that we are not alone, that we are connected to each other in ways we often do not recognize because in our normal lives we are busy and distracted. This scene may feel like a chance to breath. A chance to be ourselves. Perhaps even a chance to find ourselves in new ways.

Be honest - how many of you would just like to watch that video over and over until it's coffee time? I get that completely.

But our reflection on peace is a call to something with a bit more scope. To quote from the UCC web site, "September 21 is the International Day of Peace. Established by the United Nations in 1981, "Peace Day" is an opportunity for everyone to promote peace personally, politically, and communally." So looking at this beach - while peaceful - is only part of what we need to discuss.

Fortunately for us, personal peace, political peace, and communal peace are

related anyway.

[image: anger from inside out]

As you may know, for my continuing education time this year I decided that I wanted to understand hatred better. In particular, I wanted to know why hatred is so popular these days. I had some books, and some video resources. But I also just spoke with strangers. I interpreted my assignment as permission to sit down beside someone on the bus and ask them what they thought about hatred, or racism, or bigotry. I learned a lot. I will confess though that after 3 weeks of that I noticed that it dragging me down. Hatred is a tough subject. And although I did my best to take an objective, academic approach to understanding hatred, the discussions impacted me personally as well. Which will not surprise any of you I'm sure.

I learned a few things, including things I still cannot put into words. But on the subject of peace I learned this. The people I met who are choosing to hold hatred have very little personal peace. Holding hatred prevents us from living in peace.

Of course, I knew this already. In fact it was even stated in what we read from Ephesians this morning,

[image: quote below]

“For Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”.

People who choose to hold hatred live in a stark world - a world in their own minds - of “us” versus “them”. They hold fast to the idea that “they” are not like “us”, so we have to hate “them”. But in Ephesians, Jesus is credited with bringing peace to a community when following Jesus made both groups into one, and broke down the dividing wall, the hostility, between the groups”. Removing the barrier between “us” and “them” brought peace.

The words in Ephesians refer to a division within a congregation. But the principle applies even to global issue. There is a real connection between our own sense of personal peace and both political and communal peace. And to be blunt - if we want to live in peace, we must put down any hatred that we are choosing to carry. It is that simple.

[image: tashlich]

This ties in with something I experienced this week. As I mentioned during announcements last week, I was personally invited - as a Jewish ally - to a Tashlich ritual down by the lake. Tashlich is a traditional Jewish ritual of atonement that happens during Rosh Hashanah. The ritual involves “casting off” our sins and concerns. During the ritual itself items like pebbles were thrown - cast - into Lake Ontario to represent the casting off of sins.

I was honoured to be there of course. And doubly-honoured to be personally invited by people who see me as an ally for local Jewish communities. Worship leaders explained that this casting off is meant to be understood as an individual act, but also as a corporate act. We can cast off our sins in both a personal sense and also in a communal sense as a community of faith, and as a society.

Two learnings that struck me most deeply that day.

One learning came from some of the speakers. Because a handful of people were willing to speak about what they were themselves were working to cast off this year. And I was struck by their presence before they even opened their mouths. They appeared to be emotionally broken. They were not angry. They were broken. And they expressed their massive remorse at - to quote one speaker - “the genocide being done in our name”. One of the speakers teared up as they said, “the genocide being done in my name.” It was a moment of intense vulnerability.

[image: beach on lake ontario]

The other thing that struck me was this very interesting mix of actions that made up the ritual itself. On the one hand, we were participating in a ritual that has been practiced by Jews since the 13th century. On the other hand, it felt organic and natural. We met at a park on Lake Ontario situated just off the Martin Goodman bicycle trail. About 1/3 of the participants came by bicycle - as did I. That brought a “picnic” vibe to the event, in spite of the profoundness of the ritual. When the casting off was explained, we were told to take a pebble and cast it into the lake. I immediately imagined that someone must be there with a bowl of pebbles to hand out. But no. We all were invited to forage for a handy suitable item. And the beach provided many pebbles that day. I threw a small twig into the lake as I reflected on my own shortcomings.

Cycling home after the event, I reflected on how the ritual was physically different from things we do in this church. But also how emotionally and spiritually similar the ritual was to things we do here ourselves. This “casting off” of sins by throwing items into the lake is spiritually similar to what we do right here when - for example - we are invited to reflect on our lives, reflect on how we can do better. And then we are invited to write something on a piece of paper and we bring the papers forward to be shredded. The rituals look different. The underlying spiritual meaning felt familiar to me.

Because we are all human beings. We are so similar to each other. Our wants, our needs, our cares, our loves. So - why is there also so much hatred in the world?

[image: islamophobia is not freedom]

Our moment of shared humanity on Lake Ontario was a sharp contrast to the previous Friday’s commemoration of the anniversary of 9/11. That commemoration should - in my mind - be about honouring the victims, families, and first-responders of the attacks on the day. But if you read the news - even badly - you know that some people disrespected those commemorations to instead spew hatred. Specifically hatred directed at Muslims.

As one example, there was a petition - signed by over 100,000 people - demanding that the mayor of New York city not attend the memorial himself - simply because he is Muslim. Muslims were killed that day too, you know. Muslims were some of the victims, families, and first-responders of the attacks on that day.

The idea that the vile actions of 19 people should be blamed on all Muslims - that’s about 1/4 of the population of our planet - is absolutely disgusting. And yet, that rhetoric is largely given a free pass in Canada and the US.

[image: united against islamophobia and antisemitism]

Incidentally, Christians have made the mistake of blaming the many for the actions of the few before. And we must not make that mistake again. Churches used to preach the idea that we should hate all Jews because “Jews killed Jesus”. That idea was based on the story that the Pharisees paid off a small number of Jews - perhaps 19 of them - to go to Pontius Pilate and scream “crucify Jesus”. While it may be true that those

19 Jews called for the death of Jesus, it was and still is immoral and irresponsible to blame all Jews for that. Antisemitism is wrong.

We must not make the same mistake again. While it may be true that 19 Muslims made 9/11 happen, it was and still is immoral and irresponsible to blame all Muslims for that. Islamophobia is wrong.

Actually, hatred of any group is wrong, lazy, and stupid. And, choosing to hold hatred destroys our own ability to find peace in our own lives. It's time to move on from hatred in all forms. We have to move on.

And this is perhaps one way that churches and other communities of faith can help our own societies evolve. Right now. I think that is what John was talking about.

In John, as we read, Jesus said that whoever loves me will keep the teachings of Jesus. And the principle teachings we get from Jesus are about love and acceptance of others. As far as we can tell, Jesus did not hate anyone.

[image: quote below]

And Jesus ties this love together with peace, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." I have often reflected on that phrase "I do not give peace as the world gives peace". Which makes me wonder - How does the world give peace?

The way of the world is to keep trying - over and over because it never works - peace through war. But Jesus and others offer the sensible alternative. Peace through love. Or in modern language, peace through justice.

When our world calls for war, we - as people of faith - should call instead for justice.

I just realized that perhaps I skipped over something I should probably explain better. Because when we read history we realize that there are two predominant ways that humanity has tried to achieve peace.

[image: peace through understanding]

The most popular way to work for peace is through ... war. Or to be more gracious, that peace can be achieved through defeating evil in our midst. The Romans called this "peace through victory". Historically, that method of securing peace can work,

but only for a very limited period of time. Because the method absolutely must fail.

The premise behind peace through war is that we are divided into two groups. Good and evil. The idea is that peace will come after the good people kill the evil people. But it does not and cannot work because it is based on assumptions that are wrong. One problem is that we ourselves are all a mix of good and evil. There is no possibility of defeating all evil unless we kill ourselves. Another problem is that peace through war destroys so many things. It murders civilians. It destroys infrastructure. It destroys the means of production. Peace through war requires vast amounts of resources. Resources that could otherwise be used to provide healthcare, education, infrastructure, and many other social benefits.

And peace through war requires that we demonize other people. We have to manufacture hatred. Because most people do not actually want to kill people that they think of as equals. So we have to demonize “them”. But when a society manufactures hatred, we end up living in a hateful world. Who wants to live like that? Who wants to live in a world where we cannot find any peace because we have been propagandized into feeling constant fear?

Of all the things I learned about hatred this summer, the sickest learning is that much of the hatred we see on our own streets is being intentionally manufactured. There are numerous propaganda campaigns designed to make us fearful so that we will surrender our own civil rights and put our tax dollars into the war machine instead of supporting our local schools and hospitals.

If you think my words are a bit extreme - consider this.

In the US, some politicians blame most social ills on immigrants, and Muslims. But the last time that the US was actually attacked was on January 6, 2021, when a group of insurrectionists attacked the State Capital and murdered police officers. The people that made that attack on January 6 included a very small number of immigrants, and there is no evidence that any Muslims were involved in that attack.

Peace through war cannot work. Trying to create peace through war is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline.

[image: no justice no peace]

The idea of peace through war is a very human idea. Jesus (and others) invite us into something that the world generally does not give. And that is the idea of peace through justice. The premise is that war and conflict are caused by fear and lack of basic human needs. And therefore, fixing underlying injustices will bring about peace.

Peace through justice is something very few civilizations have tried. Peace through justice means that instead of investing money only into the military-industrial complex we also invest in people, healthcare, education, housing, decent employment. All things that actually lead to peace.

Here is one way to summarize the difference between peace through war and peace through justice. With peace through war we need to create an enemy. We need to label people into Friend or foe. We divide our strength into two and then further reduce our collective strength by having those two groups fight each other. Everyone loses in war.

But with peace through justice, we do not need an enemy to attack. Instead, we need an issue, an injustice that we can fight. And we do not split our energy into two forces, because we can all fight that injustice together. We combine our energy to more effectively remove that injustice from our societies.

Our real enemy is not the group that we are told to hate. The real enemy is hatred itself.

[image: beach on lake ontario]

And that idea takes me back to that beach on Lake Ontario. Those Tashlich speakers were not looking for someone to blame. They were not dividing the world into friend and foe. They stood up and named an injustice - one they themselves were connected to and realized it needed to be cast off. Their words were not an attack on an enemy. The words were an act of repair.

That is what peace through justice actually looks like. Not an army. Not a slogan. It's a pebble, a twig, and the willingness to say "this is happening in my name, and I have work to do to stop it."

That is the invitation in front of all of us this morning. Not to name our enemy. But to name our injustice, and to do something about it - together.

When our world calls for war, we - as people of faith - should call instead for justice.

Peace be with you.

Amen.