

28 June 2009

Peace in Pieces

Philippians 4:4-7

Years ago I broke something of Julie's that was in way too many pieces for me to fix. I took every bit of it that I could find and put it into a box and stored it on top of one of my bookshelves. Over the next few years I had to move that box a dozen times or so—when we repainted the office, when we moved furniture around, on those rare occasions when I dusted the top of the bookcase. When we got some new bookcases I found the box of pieces and moved it into the closet, up on another shelf where it sat until we packed up to move to London back in 2006.

I don't know what made me keep that box for so long. The pieces inside were of something that had been precious to Julie, but there wasn't any hope that I was going to be able to fix it on my own. And so I carried it and moved it from place to place until there was no place left to store it.

*4Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

On the front of your bulletin you can read the passage from Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit—the nine qualities or characteristics or behaviors that show the way the Spirit transforms us into mature disciples of Jesus Christ. Today we're going to take a look at what it means to say the Spirit produces 'peace' in our lives.

But first, take a look at the passage from Galatians. Notice again that 'fruit' is singular here—it's like that in the original language, too. All nine of these are the fruit of the Spirit—not just any one or two of them. This is not a smorgasbord. We can't say 'I'm loving and faithful, but don't ask me to have any self-control.' Or 'I'm quite happy being gentle and good, as long as I don't have to be patient with people who annoy me.'

The fruit of the Spirit is a package deal, and that's crucial for our understanding this summer of what the Spirit does in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit is expressed in all nine of these important ways.

That's important, because it builds on the concepts we've been talking about all year.

We started back in February with an extended conversation about the way things were supposed to be. We were made to live in God's perfect Shalom, a sense of wholeness and completeness. The 'webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' Remember that?

And when that perfect Shalom was broken—when it was shattered into pieces—God provided a way back to him—a way to put the pieces back together—a way back to wholeness and the way we were meant to live. We've been talking about the Atonement as God's drama in three acts—as God's invitation to come and live the way he made us to live in the first place. The first two acts were Christ's death on the cross as God's response to the problem of sin, and then Christ's resurrection that demonstrates God's power over all things, even death.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the third act in that play, and it brings with it a quality of life that we haven't seen in a long, long time. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—the fruit of the Spirit describe what that Shalom life is supposed to look like. It describes what it can look like when we let the Spirit live in us and work through us.

The city of Philippi was an interesting part of the Roman Empire. It was a retirement community for veterans of the Roman legions, and a very patriotic and nationalistic place. It was also a place where strong women had a long tradition of running things: businesses, private armies, and one source says that women in Philippi regularly negotiated treaties with other cities and states. Paul loved the Philippians—this letter is the most personal of all his writings. We're going to spend some time in Philippians in the coming year.

Paul writes this letter while he's in prison awaiting execution. He has no idea when his life might be taken from him, but his confidence in God is so great that in the first section of this letter he makes a bold statement: Whether he lives or dies he trusts that God has a plan for him. 'For to me,' Paul says, 'to live is Christ and to die is gain.'

Paul is clearly operating with a completely different set of values here. Let's tally it up: He's in prison for sharing his faith, he's separated from his friends and home and work, and he's waiting to see when and how his death sentence is going to be carried out.

By any of our measures Paul is in an awful place, and yet he sees it through the perspective of one whose purpose and calling comes from God, and is measured by the values that come from living a life of faithful discipleship. It's not that Paul

doesn't care about his life. The point is that Paul cares about his life in the context of his devotion to the one who gave him that life in the first place. He's not being flippant about suffering and dying—I'm sure he would choose not to be a martyr—but he's being honest about what his own life means within the larger task of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to a hungry world.

In our text Paul directly addresses some people in the church who were having a hard time working together—two women who were leaders in the church in Philippi. That's in the verses just before our text. Here he is, waiting for his own execution, and he's concerned about an argument between people he cares about in a church he loves. Amazing.

In our text Paul is still talking about living radical lives marked by the Spirit—notice the other examples of 'spirit life' in the text:

There's joy. 'Rejoice in the Lord always.' Really? I still have a hard time believing that Paul was rejoicing as he sat in his cell, and yet part of me is envious of Paul—of the strength of his faith. I wonder what it would be like to live that way—to genuinely feel that way.

And there's another example of the Spirit's work in this text. 'Let your gentleness be evident to all.' Everyone? Seriously. It's hard enough to be gentle with people we love sometimes, but everyone? In our Spring Bible study here we talked for a long time about how hard it is to show love and patience to people who annoy us or threaten us.

And then the kicker: And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. I love this part, because he's not saying just that God's peace is so great that we can't even comprehend it. He's saying that the peace of the Spirit isn't always going to make sense to us—it's not always going to conform to our values.

How does the Spirit show through us in the form of peace?

It's far too easy to reduce this call to peace as an invitation to 'inner peace.' You know what I mean: So much of the talk about spirituality in our culture is offering a sort of detachment from the cares of the world. There's a Facebook advertisement for a Kabbalah retreat in the Peak District, and the banner at the top says that I can 'De-Stress and Be Inspired.'

The guy in front of the Scientology office down the street is forever inviting me in for a stress test, as if the reduction of stress is what life is about. That one bugs me especially because I do my best work under stress—why would he want to take

that away from me? That's just mean.

And then we come to the fruit of the Spirit. We read our text and we're tempted to miss the truly radical gift that's being offered. Let me say that a different way: to reduce the fruit of the Spirit to a list of nice qualities to have is a complete misreading not only of the text, but of God's intent for our lives. The fruit of the spirit represent a new way of relating to each other—to our families and friends and even to strangers.

The fruit of the Spirit describe a radically different way of approaching the real concerns of this world. They don't call us to detach—to find serenity or calmness or our bliss, whatever that means. The fruit of the Spirit are the mark of living life as if God exists—as if the Lord of the Universe actually has something to say and do and transform in the way things work.

Which brings us back to 'peace' as evidence that the Spirit is working in our lives.

One of the small benefits of occasional insomnia is that every once in a while I'm up late enough to see the CBS Evening News from the States on Sky. I saw an amazing story last week.

Dan Cherry was an American pilot in the Vietnam War. During his service he was in a famous dogfight with a North Vietnamese pilot—the History Channel even made a documentary about it complete with actual voice recordings and computer imagery.

In the end Dan Cherry shot the other plane out of the sky, but he always wondered what happened to the other pilot. After the release of the documentary he went looking for the pilot he shot down, and ended up being reunited with him on a Vietnamese version of 'This is Your Life', a show that brought long lost friends back together.

Now these two warriors weren't friends, but they became close after meeting each other in person. They've traveled together, Cherry wrote a book about his experiences, and in the closing image of the report, the two men are holding each other's grandchildren, and the narrator said:

*'And just like that, the War went away.'*

This doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? I mean, if anyone has a right to hold a grudge, it's the North Vietnamese pilot who had his plane blown out from under him. And yet, even though it defies logic—even though it 'transcends all understanding'—these two men found...and made...peace between them.

If these two enemies can experience the gift of peace between them, then there really isn't much good reason why we can't be agents of peace in our lives—in this world that cries out for the hope that comes from an authentic life of peace. The truly radical, mysterious and transforming power of peace from the Holy Spirit is that it accomplishes for us what we can't do on our own.

That leaves us with some questions.

How do we make the war go away?

How do we acknowledge the broken pieces we carry around with us from place to place?

How do we take those pieces out of their hiding places and let God reassemble them?

How do we step aside and let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us to restore the Shalom we were made to enjoy—to produce fruit in our lives—to show himself in qualities that mark us as followers of Jesus?

As with most things that matter, there aren't easy answers to any of these questions.

But if you take anything away from this message today, I hope it's that you see peace in all its forms as a central part of what it means to be a Christian person.

Being forgiving, generous, loving agents of peace to our families and friends, and to strangers and even enemies—that's a part of what it means to have the Holy Spirit living and working in each one of us.

In that sense this isn't as much something we have to do, as something we're called to allow the Spirit to do in and through our lives.

The call on each one of us is to live that way even when it goes against the culture, or conventional wisdom, or even just the prevailing winds. The call on each one of us is to be agents of the Prince of Peace, even when it surpasses all our understanding. Amen.