

072912 Rev. Seth D. Jones
The Gift of Peace – The Spirit of Prayer
Proverbs 16:7; Hebrews 12:11-14; Matthew 5:3-12 (3:9)

Prayer is where we set our minds, souls, hearts and strength to the expectations of the Kingdom of God. Prayer is where we acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit and expect them to be active in our daily lives. I suspect, for many of you, one of the expectations you have with regard to your spiritual life is that you have to come up with these gifts yourself. In our day and age, we believe WE create love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We believe they are innate to our being and therefore we are responsible for their creation, maintenance and activity in the world. Our many misunderstandings within our interpretation of Scripture come from applying Enlightenment and Modern ideas to the ancient world.

When we speak of the gifts of the Spirit, we need to understand these things as truly gifts. All nine of these qualities are, in the ancient mindset, external to us. Human qualities and values were given from the outside, not created within the person or people. They are given to us. They are implanted into us. They are, in Luther's words, 'alien' to us. Indeed, each one of us carries the inherent goodness of creation at our core. We are created in God's image. But we are also fallen creatures, as I said last week. The gifts of the Holy Spirit make no sense as gifts if they are already something we have. So I want us to change our understanding a bit, as a thought experiment if nothing else, to see the gift of peace in particular as something external to ourselves. Peace is something that is given to us because we do not have it, and it is something we live into because it is not a quality that is innate to who we are as human beings.

This is why prayer is, among other things, a discipline of setting expectations. Since I am not inherently peaceful, I need to have an expectation that the gift of the Holy Spirit I have been given will guide me toward ways of peace in the world and in my relationships. I have to look for it in myself and others because it is not something I know, except by repeated exposure to the gift given. **Proverbs 16:7** says, *“When the ways of people please the LORD, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.”* God is the cause and source of peace, not us. We, God's people, follow in the ways of God. And in doing so, God causes peace to be among enemy and friend alike.

Prayer, then, is where we set expectations and acknowledge God's presence in the outcomes of our days. Prayer is where we reconcile ourselves to the Lord and therefore seek reconciliation with others. Reconciliation is the foundation of peace, is it not? We cannot be at peace with one another when the conflicts between us are at the forefront of our minds. We must either reconcile *the situation* within ourselves in such a way that we can be at peace with the situation as it is, or we must alter the situation by reconciling with *the person* so we might be at peace with one another. And certainly, we cannot know the peace of mind and the calmness of heart we spoke of last week when we are in conflict with God.

Even our expectations, though, are not set by us. We are called to those expectations by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 5 has been my guiding verse in Scripture for several years now. It may change one day. I was saying even our expectations are not set by us. Approaching the world with an expectation of peace is what God has done for us. 2nd Corinthians 5 says, *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”* (As an aside, I suggest that all of you find a guiding verse for yourself and refer to it often).

Because we have received the gift of peace from the Holy Spirit, because we are given the ministry of

reconciliation, we are now agents of peace for one another and for a world apparently bent on destruction and death. Listen to our reading from Hebrews and hear the description of what it means to be an agent of peace: *“Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled”* (Heb 12:14-15). So much of what we see in the news, in our conflicts with others and in our daily lives around the community are the result of giving sway to that 'root of bitterness'. Being an agent of God's peace, being a minister of reconciliation, being a prayerful person means we step out into the world, out of these church walls, with the expectant hope that God will once again show himself in our lives and in our world. We become the ones who set an expectation of peace and reconciliation, for ourselves and one another. Indeed, wherever peace and reconciliation are occurring, we know God is working close at hand.

Because of what God has already done in the world through Christ – reconciled all things to himself – we have an expectation that peace will be the guiding force of our daily lives. In Bible study this past week, we were talking about setting expectations. I mentioned a friend of mine who is a pastor and often struggles with unbelief. He wakes up and has nothing – no faith, no trust, no expectation of God's presence. And so his prayer is one of setting an expectation. He prays, “Lord, today my belief and faith is up to you. Let me see your presence today.” And virtually every day he prays that prayer, God does just that – shows himself in acts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. In response, Jean said, “Your friend is not living on yesterday's grace. He is seeking God's grace today.” We trust in God's grace, but God's grace will not look the same from one day to the next. God's grace is new every day. *“You are a new creation in Christ”* is a daily statement. Not only is this a high expectation of ourselves and others and of God, it is a great and wonderful expectation. Why not commit to setting the expectation for yourself today?

Most of the expectations we enter the world with are negative. I am not talking about masking negative things with positive mental thoughts or covering them with platitudes so we cannot see the negative. I am talking about something much more involved and difficult. Jesus does not deny the bad things, the evil things of this world. What Jesus does do, and what Jesus calls us to, by the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit, is to be the agent of the expectations we do set. He confronts evil with the expectation of the power of God.

We may enter situations and relationships with an expectation of retribution. There may be things we have done to others in which the most likely response will be *'an eye for an eye'*. This is the expectation Jacob had with his brother Esau. After years of cheating Esau out of his birthright and inheritance and taking advantage of Esau's impulsive nature, Jacob came into Esau's territory as he wandered the land. Jacob's messengers tell him that Esau has amassed 400 men to meet Jacob. This, of course, terrifies Jacob. He has an expectation of retribution given what he has done to his brother. So Jacob divides his family and goods, in case Esau seeks to destroy everything Jacob has. And so imagine Jacob's surprise when, upon meeting Esau in the desert, *“Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept”* (Gen 33:4). Jacob's expectation of retribution is defied by Esau's expectation and hope for peace and reconciliation.

We are inundated with bad news all the time. We have an expectation that evil either will be or already is victorious over any hope we might have of a peaceful and loving world. But even in the midst of evil, the expectation of peace is active. In the tragic and horrifying shooting in Aurora last week, did you know that three of the victims were in the line of fire because they deliberately put themselves there? Those three men were shielding their wives, girlfriends and children from James Holmes crazed attack on the movie theater. Their deaths are tragic and I am not seeking to minimize the horror and tragedy of what happened by reframing it. What I do want us to see, however, is that the expectation of the victory of evil on the part

of the shooter and the same expectation underneath the 24 hour news coverage of the event was overcome and defeated by the acts of love and sacrifice committed by these three men. Those acts are only possible by a greater expectation, an expectation built on a desire and expectation of peace and reconciliation for others.

Perhaps the most difficult expectation to overcome is the expectation of the continuation of the status quo. More often than not, the status quo is defined by the powerful lording their power over the powerless. Whether it is institutions of power lording it over individuals; or it is the willingness of the individual to tolerate the need of insti to control and take over everything; or the turning of a blind eye to the disenfranchisement of a class of people; or just people being greedy and needy with other people; Jesus Christ overthrows all those concerns by calling all of us to the greater Kingdom of God defined by His peace and His glory. The status quo, the way we have always done things, cannot stand in the face of the coming of the kingdom of God.

And what that Kingdom looks like, over and against all our earthly kingdoms past, present and future, is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:3-12).

This is what the gift of peace looks like. This is what the Holy Spirit has given us the power to see. This is what our expectation finally is all about: the coming of the Kingdom of God in this world. The kingdom of God is full of unexpected expectations. It is not those who are absolutely confident who inherit the kingdom – it is those whose spirits are suffering, who are wondering where God is in their lives. The strong and powerful are not the ones who will inherit God's creation – it is the meek, those who are overcome by the power of others. Those who show mercy are the ones who receive God's mercy, not those who are agents of God's judgment. Peacemakers, those who are seeking reconciliation in their lives and the grace of God for others are the children of God, because they are like children, untainted by the need for power and the exertion of strength to make themselves known to others. The world does not respond well to any of these. All these qualities of the Kingdom of God subvert the expectations of the world. Persecution is a strong possibility. Rejection by friends, family, institutions is a distinct likelihood.

But rejoice, for you are setting your expectations on the Kingdom of God. And the results of those expectations are indicators that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Remember Jesus' first words to us in the Gospel of Mark, *"The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mk 1:15)*. The Kingdom of God has drawn near. Our entire prayer life, together and individually, is a preparation and a setting of the mind, heart, soul and strength toward seeing that Kingdom now, in this world, in all our relationships, in our very being. So, like the author of Hebrews tells us, and I am paraphrasing here, *"Set yourself in a position of prayer, for your healing is in your reconciliation with God. And in being reconciled with God, seek peace with everyone you meet, for God's grace, God's kingdom, is made manifest in the peace you make with others."* May it always be so for each of us and may the Holy Spirit make God's peace known to all of us. Amen.