

For He Himself is our Peace

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

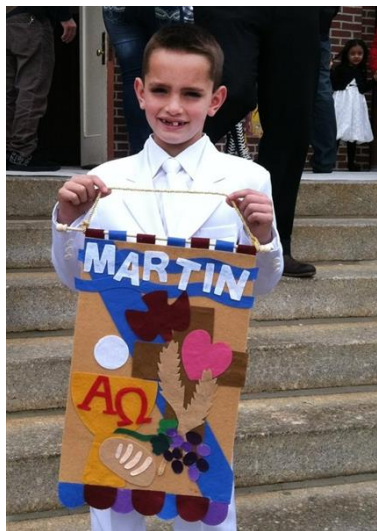
Feb. 3, 2019 – AM Sermon

Rev. Peter Jonker

Ephesians 2:11-22

There is such a beautiful promise of peace in this passage. Peace through the blood of Christ! Peace in two dimensions! Peace with God. Sinners brought near to the father through the blood of the Son. Peace between people. Walls broken down in Jesus and old enemies becoming part of a new household. It's a beautiful and hopeful vision. But sometimes that vision clashes with what we see right in front of our eyes.

I have a vivid memory of studying this text 6 years ago during the week of the Boston bombing. I was preparing a sermon on this passage, I was enjoying the promise of these beautiful words, when all of a sudden I started to get breaking news alerts on my computer. Two bombs had exploded at the finish line of the Boston marathon. I clicked on the links and soon I saw video of the event. Crowds of people from all over the country were gathered to cheer on the finishers. Families shouted their encouragement to loved ones as they finished the race. Finishers crossed the line with joy. Then a boom and a flash and then another boom. The peace was suddenly shattered by two explosions. The cheers were replaced by screams. One moment there's a crowd of happy people; the next moment people are running away terrified. Most of you have seen the footage. You remember. I came back to the text and, as you can probably imagine, it sounded different. The violence I'd seen on the news formed a sharp contrast with the words I was reading on the page.



There was one picture from the blast that summarized the tension I felt. It was a picture of the youngest victim, Martin Richard. Let me describe it: There's Martin. He's this beautiful 8 year old kid. He's got dark hair and a shy gap-toothed smile. What made this photo particularly poignant is that it was taken at his confirmation. It was taken at his profession of faith, at least the Catholic version of that. He's standing on the steps of his church, he's wearing his white suit for this special day, he's got that shy smile on his face, and he's holding up his confirmation

banner for his Mom or dad or whoever was taking that picture. The banner is full of Christian symbols and across the top it says "Martin." I saw that picture and my initial reaction was, "*O Lord no! How can this be!? Where is the peace? Where is the peace?*" When something like this happens, your Bible study questions change. I wasn't just trying to figure out what Paul was saying to the people of Ephesus, I was trying to figure out what these words could say to the people of Boston. If I travelled to the finish line of the Boston marathon and read these words about peace on earth and one new humanity in Jesus, would these words sound hopeful? Or would they sound like an impossible dream? The more I read and the more I studied, the more I realized that these words were exactly the words that the people of Boston needed, and they are exactly the words all people need when they feel like they are living in a world too full of walls and fear and anger and violence.

Let's look at those words again. In verse 14 of our passage, Paul talks about Jesus bringing peace by breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. What is Paul thinking about when he writes those words? Probably he's thinking about a real physical wall of division that was in the temple. When Paul talks about tearing down the dividing wall, he's probably thinking of the wall that divided the court of the Gentiles from the places where the Jews were allowed to go. That wall was there because Gentiles weren't considered spiritually clean enough to get any closer to God. That wall wasn't just a physical thing, that wall was a pretty good symbol for the real hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles. They didn't like each other and a lot of the dislike came from differences in their outward appearances and outward practices. They used those outward differences to build dividing walls of hostility in their minds. The Gentiles would look at the Jews and say, "Did you know those people won't eat pork? Bunch of weirdos." The Jews would look at the Gentiles and say, "Did you know those people eat pig meat. Disgusting. Who does that?" "My neighbor spends the whole Sabbath day working in his garden. What a godless pagan." "Do you know that my neighbors sit around all Saturday long and do nothing?" "Those pagans don't practice circumcision. They do not follow the ways of the Lord!" "Do you know what those people do to their baby boys?" You see how that works? When people feel afraid, when people are under pressure, they put up dividing walls of hostility between themselves and people who are different, and they move away from them.

This is exactly what happened during and after the Boston bombing. After the bombs went off people lost their sense of security. That's what terrorists want of course: they want you to feel insecure and afraid. After the people lost their sense of security, how did they start looking at the people around them, especially those who were different? Suspicion. Right after the bombing there was a report that people should all be on the lookout for a dark-skinned man in a dark hoodie. Even though the bombers turned out to be as white as me. And then a report that the apartment of a Saudi man was being searched and he was being held at the hospital. It turned out to be a false alarm. This Saudi man was a student who was himself a victim of the blast. He was later exonerated, but not before his roommate was grilled by the police for 5 hours and, far worse, chased by reporters who asked him repeatedly "Are you living with a killer!? Is your roommate a murderer?!" There's the dynamic again: We lose our sense of security, we look at others with suspicion, especially those who are different, we build our dividing walls of hostility, we move away. It's a pattern as old as the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's sin blows up the peace of that place. Adam and Eve lose their sense of security, and what do they do? They build dividing walls of hostility. They point fingers at each other. "It's that woman's fault!" They flee from God in shame; they push him away. In every generation, the walls of hostility all have the same spiritual shape. Whether it's the Boston bombing, or the hostility between Jews

and Gentiles in Paul's day, or the animosity between Adam and Eve in the garden, or even the animosity we saw blow up two weeks ago with the differing interpretations of what really happened on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, it's all the same. People lose their sense of security, they look with fear at others, they build a wall of hostility, they move away.

But, while that is the general movement of sin and misery, it is not Jesus' movement. When it comes to sinful and miserable people, Jesus moves in a completely different direction. He moves towards people. Jesus sat at the right hand of God and looked down on a world torn up by sin and violence, and what did he do? He didn't push it away, he said, "I want to go to that place." He became one of us. He became a vulnerable child in a manger. When he walked this earth, he didn't move away from the dangerous and sinful people. He got so close to lepers they could touch him. And when the threat level rose he didn't move away from the most dangerous places, he went right to meet fear and death in its strongest place. He went to the place of curse and hatred and mockery. He went to the cross and he broke the power of sin and fear by giving his life. The prince of darkness want fear and suspicion to drive people apart, but the prince of peace always moves toward others in love. He brings us near. *"Remember that at one time you were separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."* Do you see the movement of the gospel? It's not running away, it's moving towards the broken places and the broken people with the gospel of peace.

And because Jesus moved towards us and saved us, we are free to move towards each other. Think again of the tragedy in Boston. What happened immediately after the blast? Well if you watch videos of the incident you see that, right after the bomb goes off, everyone moves away. They are afraid. They run from the trouble. That's what most people do. But then if you look closely, there are also a few people who do just the opposite. The bomb goes off and they run towards the trouble. A nurse in the race tent is helping runners, and she hears the bomb and as soon as she realizes what's happening she rushes to help the victims. A police officer is working a block away, he hears the blast and he comes running. An EMT is sitting in a restaurant nearby, she hears the blast and runs towards the chaos to see what she can do to bind up the broken. This is a picture of who the church is supposed to be in the world. Scouts, this is the kind of men we are training you to become. Profession of faith people, this is what you have signed up for. You are secure in Jesus. His love has an unshakeable hold on you. Now He has called you to be one of those people who moves towards the world's trouble. We are God's first responders. We are the EMT's for a broken world. We move towards frightened and broken people with the gospel of Jesus in our mouth and the love of God in our hands.

Of course while that is all true, the last thing I want to give you the impression that breaking down the walls of hostility and the bringing of peace is up to us. It's not. We are the workers but Jesus does the heavy lifting. Later today read through this passage and ask yourself this question. As Paul describes this great peace, how many times are human beings the subject of the verbs? The answer is zero. There are nine active verbs in this passage. God or Jesus is the subject of all of them. There are four verbs that have human beings as the subject, but those verbs are passive. They don't describe things we do, they describe things done to us. Paul wants us to understand that while we are called to be ministers of peace and reconciliation in our homes and in our neighborhoods and in our world, this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. If peace were something that was left up to us, who knows if we'd ever find it? But if Peace is God's thing, well then, it is sure to be.

Which brings us back to that picture of Martin Richard. Martin standing on the church steps, in his white suit, holding up his confirmation banner. I told you that when I first saw that image I felt pain. Lord where is your peace? But when I looked a second time I saw that Martin was holding up the answer to my own question. On Martin's banner was all the symbolism of God's strong promises. There was a blue stream for the water of baptism. "Don't be afraid, you are my beloved child." There was a loaf and a cup for the food of this table. "Don't be afraid. I am the bread of life. Whoever eats this bread will have eternal life." There was the cross. "Do not be afraid, I gave my life for you. You belong to me and nothing can take me from my hands." That day, the day of the picture, Martin had claimed those eternal promises for himself, and they are stronger than any bomb a terrorist could set off. Today James and Ryan have claimed those eternal promises for themselves and those promises are stronger than anything they will face in their lives. Today these are the same promises that hold and support every one of us. We are held by the peace that passes understanding, the peace of Jesus Christ that shall one day fill this earth. Don't be fooled by the troubles of this world. He has already won. It is finished. So go in peace.

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