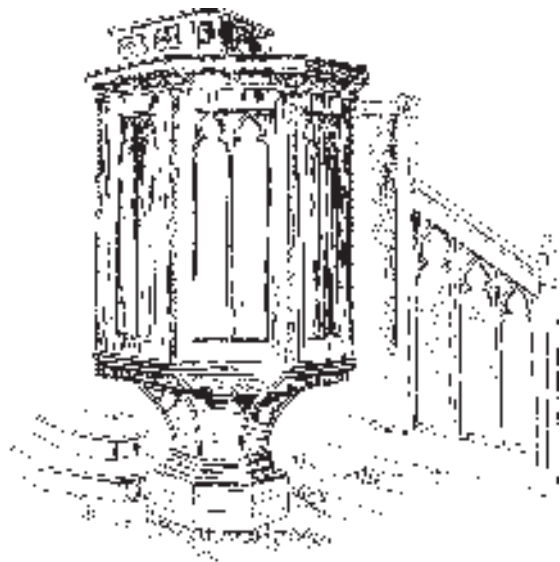


February 21, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

**Peacemaking:
The Believer's Calling**
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 5:1-11

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
(Matthew 5:9 New Revised Standard Version)

When Tony Campolo was in a church in Oregon, he prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, he received a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Tony said, "Had?" Whoa, he thought, it's happened.

She said, "He died." Campolo felt terrible.

"Don't feel bad," the woman said. "When he came into church that Sunday, he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up.

He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew toward God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence.

"After you prayed for him, a peace came over him and a joy came into him. The last three days have

been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read scripture. We've prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And, I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing."

Then she said something incredibly profound: "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

Jesus said, "Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!"
(Matthew 5:9 Good News Bible)

An elderly couple lived together in a Presbyterian nursing home. Though they had been married for 60 years, their relationship was strained with constant arguments, disagreements, and shouting contests. The fights didn't stop even in the nursing home; the couple argued and squabbled from the time they got up in the morning until they fell in bed at night.

The nursing home supervisor eventually threatened to throw them out if they didn't change their ways. Even then the couple couldn't agree on what to do.

Finally, the wife said to her husband, "I'll tell you what, Joe; let's pray that one of us dies. After the funeral is over, I'll go live with my sister."

Jesus said, "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called children of God."
(Matthew 5:9 New Living Translation)

Some years ago a funeral was held for Grace Thomas in the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia. Not many people remember Grace Thomas today; indeed I had almost forgotten about her myself until I chanced across her story in a book I was reading this week and had my memory of her stirred.

Grace was the daughter of a Birmingham, Alabama, streetcar conductor and his wife. When she married in the late 1930s, she moved to Atlanta and took a clerking job in one of the state government offices. Through her work, she developed an interest in law and politics, and she enrolled in a local law school that offered night classes.

After years of part-time study, she finally completed law school, and her family wondered what she would do with her law degree. They were shocked when Grace announced that she had decided to enter the 1954 election race for governor of Georgia. There were nine candidates for governor that year, eight men and Grace, but there was really only one issue. In the famous *Brown v. the Board of Education* case earlier that year, the Supreme Court had declared racially "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional and thus paved the way for integration of the public schools. Eight of the gubernatorial candidates spoke out angrily against the court's decision. Only Grace said that she thought the decision was fair and just and ought to be welcomed by the citizenry. Her campaign slogan was "Say Grace at the Polls." Not many did; she ran dead last, and her family was relieved that she had gotten this out of her system.

But, she had not. Eight years later, in 1962, she ran for governor again. By then, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, and her message of racial harmony was hotly controversial. She received death threats, and her family traveled with her as she campaigned, in order to provide protection and moral support. She finished last again on Election Day, but her campaign was a testimony to peace, goodwill and racial tolerance.

One day Grace made a campaign appearance in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square in Louisville was not a courthouse or a war memorial but an old slave market, a tragic and evil place where human beings had once been bought and sold. Grace chose the slave market as the site for her campaign speech, and as she stood on the very spot where slaves had been auctioned, a hostile crowd of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear what she would say. "The old has passed away," she began, "and the new has come. This place," she said, gesturing to the market, "represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgians, white and black, can join hands to work together."

This was provocative talk in the Georgia of 1962, and the crowd stirred. "Are you a communist?" someone shouted at her.

Grace paused in mid-sentence. "No," she said softly. "I am not."

"Well, then," continued the heckler, "where'd you get those damned ideas?"

Grace thought for a minute, and then she pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. "I got them over there," she said, "in Sunday school."

Jesus said, "You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family."

(Matthew 5:9 Message Bible)

A friend of mine named Lee Eclov tells this story:

I called him Two-Phone Joe. The first time I met him, I was sitting at an outdoor table at my favorite coffee spot. He came out, cell phone pressed between shoulder and ear, talking a blue streak. He had a cup of coffee in one hand, a Coke in the other, and another phone on his belt. When he put his cup down to hang up, I said, "Man, you've got to relax a little!" And, that's how my friendship got started with one of the most hyper guys I've ever known.

Joe and I talked often. Actually, Joe ranted and raved, and I mostly listened. Once I was sitting at an inside table and he came in, assaulting his phone as usual. He talked, loud and angry, the whole time he ordered, and then, after he sat down, he kept arguing for the whole coffee shop to hear. When he finally got off the phone, I said, "Joe, come here."

"What?" he barked guardedly.

"Sit down here," I repeated.

"Why?" he asked, but he sat down.

"Joe, I don't know if anyone has ever done this for you before, but I am going to pray for you right now." Joe's eyes got big, and he looked at me like I was crazy. Before he could run, I just put my hand on his arm and quietly prayed for a few seconds, asking God to quiet Joe and to give him peace.

"Thank you," Joe said softly, and I wondered if that might have been the first holy moment in Joe's entire tumultuous life.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognized as children of God."
(Matthew 5:9 The New Jerusalem Bible)

In times of emotional stress, a hormone, neuropeptide Y (NPY), is released into the body. This hormone undermines the body's immune system and literally makes you sick.

That's what a team of Australian researchers at Sydney's Garvan Institute scientifically confirmed in 2005. According to Fabienne Mackay of the institute, "During periods of stress, nerves release a lot of NPY, and it gets into the bloodstream where it inhibits the cells in the immune system that look out for and destroy pathogens in the body. That stress makes you sick is no longer a myth; it is a reality, and we need to take it seriously.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for it is they who will be recognized as children of God."
(Matthew 5:9 New Testament in Modern Speech)

One of my favorite authors, C.S. Lewis, writes this in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

A car is made to run on gas, and it will not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
(Matthew 5:9 New Revised Standard Version)

With St. Francis of Assisi, let us pray...
Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace!
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

Oh, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life! Amen.