

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News for the Peacemakers
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Isaiah 55:6-13; Matthew 5:9

One of the gifts of living in Manila when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer was that I was able to meet volunteers from around the world who would come to the islands to warm up and relax after their two years of service. I was able to meet volunteers from places like Korea, Afghanistan and Nepal. The one volunteer I have been thinking about all week as I prepared this sermon was the one from Nepal. He had been an engineering major in college (structural engineering to be specific) and his job in the Peace Corps was to help communities build bridges across vast, deep valleys. It was fascinating to hear him talk about first having to learn how the Nepalese built their own bridges, then figuring out slightly better ways to build them, and then convincing people to adopt his new strategies. In the end, he was able to build several bridges. The benefit of these bridges, he said, was not simply that it shortened and made safer people's routes from one place to another, but that it benefited people on both sides of the valley. It made commerce easier. It made communication easier. And in the end, everyone flourished...my words.

What I would like us all to do this morning is to hold this visual in our minds (the visual of the bridges this volunteer helped to build) as a metaphor for what it means to be a peacemaker. To be a peacemaker is to build bridges across great divides, whether they be political, economic, racial, or any other kind, so that in the end both sides are joined together and flourish together. I say this because of the word, peace. In Greek the word is "*irenie*" and in Hebrew, "*shalom*," and they both mean more than a cessation of hostilities. They mean flourishing. They mean to enjoy the flourishing that God desires for creation. *Irenie* and *Shalom* can be seen in the Isaiah text where the prophet speaks of the earth bringing forth seed to the sower and bread to the eater..." And this flourishing of seed and bread is not intended just for God's people but for all the nations that shall be led to them, as noted in Isaiah 55:4-5. Another way to translate this beatitude then is that there is wonderful news for *Shalomers*, those who build bridges and create flourishing for all.

While this all sounds wonderful, being *Shalomers* and building bridges across great divides so that people can flourish together is dangerous work. In fact, I would argue that this is the most dangerous of all the beatitudes. It was the most dangerous for Jesus because most of the people in Galilee, in Jerusalem and in Rome had no desire to build bridges. Instead, they wanted to burn them. I say this because Galilee was a hotbed of revolution and rebellion. The people there were known as troublemakers who regularly revolted against their overlords and killed their oppressors. This led to repression from the powers of the day, leading to ever increasing levels of distrust, hatred and anger. One of the outcomes of this cycle of violence was that anyone who tried to build bridges was seen as an appeaser, an enemy, as someone who must die. This meant that Jesus' words in this beatitude about being a peacemaker were tantamount to a declaration of surrender to the oppressors. Perhaps this is why the next beatitude, which we will examine next week, speaks of being persecuted.

Unfortunately, this beatitude has not become any less dangerous across time. I say this because of the moment in which we live. As we draw closer and closer to this election, the divide between red and blue,

between Trump and Biden supporters, between maskers and anti-maskers, friends and family members has been growing deeper and wider and becoming more and more violent. There have been plots to kidnap and kill politicians, whether it is our governor or the ricin poisoned letters to the White House. There have been acts of violence in which protestors have been shot by militia members or shots fired into cars with Trump stickers. There have been attacks on those not wearing masks as well those asking people to wear them. This has been amplified by the rhetoric coming from political parties that implies that their opponents are everything from radical socialists bent on destroying our nation, to fascist dictatorial wannabes who desire to oppress anyone who is not white and rich. To suggest then that what we ought to do is to build bridges is seen as capitulation to the other side. Yet, if we want to experience the wonderful news of being God's children, then we need to begin construction of those bridges as soon as possible that we might all flourish, rather than all fail.

The wonderful news for shalomers who build peace, who build bridges, is that they become the children of God. And what is a child of God? It is someone who is about the work of their parent; meaning they are about the work of God which is building bridges across all valleys of race, wealth, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, nationality or anything else that divides humanity. It is doing, in other words, the hard work of listening, learning and loving, doing the hard work of the cross, doing the hard work of this communion table. For, my friends, this is the work God has been about from the beginning to time, to bring together as one humanity all of those whom God has created in God's own image.

My challenge for all of us over the next few days, weeks, months and years is that we see ourselves as shalomers so that we can be the children of God, and we do so by asking ourselves this question, "How am I building bridges for Christ in order that all might flourish?"