

“A Parting Word of Peace”

Romans 12:9-18

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No matter what the circumstances, for a congregation and for a pastor, the final worship service shared is an important one, often whirling with thoughts and emotions. Ours is no different. Thoughts, emotions, and memories have flooded me day and night about you and about our serving God together. Through them all, I have been overwhelmed with gratitude to God for the honor of serving with you these last six and half years. I have learned so much from you. God has used you in my life in more ways than I can name, to make me a better pastor and I pray a better person. And I have prayed with all my heart that you have learned something from me, that God used me in your lives, as well. Knowing that teaching something new on “the last day,” would be futile, I went over all that I had preached and taught; asking God to show me what would be the “best review message” to leave with you. It was immediately clear and, as “grace would happen,” perfect for this second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday we focus on peace.

You may remember we spent the fall of 2009 in our sermon series titled Grace Happens studying the ten verses that I put on your book marks that I hope you picked up on your way in this morning! The first verse and the last are like perfect book ends. “Let love be genuine...and as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” We didn’t know then how God would guide us and how grace would happen in our lives just a year later. Even now, for some it can be hard to trust that grace is happening, but that’s what faith is... “the assurance of things hoped for!” [Hebrews 12:1]

“Let love be genuine.” If God has used me in any way in my service with you, my deepest prayer is that God has used me as an instrument of love...drawing

out our love for God and for one another as Jesus summarized in the greatest commandments. In that sermon series, “Grace Happens” you may remember we learned that the Greek word for “genuine” actually means “without hypocrisy,” and was used in references to actors hiding their true identities behind masks. We looked at the reality of church communities where many people accuse us of being a “bunch of hypocrites” and we took on the challenge that here at Covenant, we could and would, be different! We would not be “actors doing church” but authentic disciples “being a community of faith.”

Many took the challenge and risks of taking down our masks and letting others see our true selves so that we could be in real relationships with one another. Although I wasn’t there, I heard this was done last week in courageous ways at the congregational meeting...out of genuine love for God, for Covenant, and I am humbled to hear, for me as well. “Let love be genuine.” You are well on your way, thanks be to God! That’s one bookend. The other bookend is just as challenging, risky and transforming, “as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Did you hear it...really hear it? Our living in peace with others depends upon us, not them. Others can choose not to live peaceably with us but as far as it depends upon us...we are to live peaceably with all. It’s the responsibility of each of us. It’s a part of living as an authentic disciple. It means we prayerfully let go of our grudges. It doesn’t necessarily mean reconciliation but it does mean through God’s grace that it is “well with our souls.” It means that we stop blaming others and accept the responsibilities that are ours. It means that we live with the uncomfortable times of unrest and uncertainty, knowing if we do the “hard thing,” of loving genuinely...peace will come.

In the days, weeks and months ahead, you, Covenant, could pretend, be “actors of peace,” putting masks on, pushing forward to bring a sense of calm or

“business as usual,” without confronting the challenges and differences in the congregation; but I don’t believe you will do that. You are already being courageous as you seek grace happening within these changes. Albert Einstein once said, “A problem cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” Reflecting on that statement, local psychologist Arden Mahlberg says, “So it is with our human differences. Only through the eyes of Christ, the eyes of love and compassion, are differences not categorized (neither Jew nor Greek). When not categorized, but perceived as the individual expressions that they are, differences become things to marvel at and celebrate.<sup>1</sup> Differences do not need to cause divisions! In between Paul’s two bookends, there are incredible words of wisdom, on how we can live with differences by being instruments...not actors...but instruments of peace. “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. ...”

Covenant, you can be a different kind of church; a community of faith loving genuinely...a community of faith that lives “as far as it depends upon you peaceably with all.” And you are poised to do this! You are “awake and aware” that this is a challenging as well as potentially exciting time for you as a congregation. But it will take continued faith in God’s grace and guidance, and a strong commitment to working together as a community of faith. You will need to ask yourselves hard questions...like, “what kind of community are we?” And looking at your community through the eyes of Christ, with love and compassion, you will have opportunities to become the community God is calling you to be. But I encourage you to remember its God’s vision that you are seeking. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wisely said, “The person who’s in love with their vision of community will destroy community. But the person who loves the people around them will

create community everywhere they go.” My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, create community here by “genuinely loving one another...and as far as it depends upon you live peaceably with all.”

I have tried to do this as I have served with you. Some of my colleagues have said, “You’re not supposed to love them” ...I don’t know how not to. It’s the model of Jesus’ ministry that pulls at soul. On the night before he died, Jesus didn’t call his disciples to the Upper Room for a board meeting to discuss a strategic plan for after his crucifixion and resurrection. No, he called them together to tell them that he no longer would call them servants, but friends, and to give them a precious gift, his peace, a different kind of peace than the world gives. He called them together to tell them, and through them, to tell disciples of all times and places, including us, that Jesus loves us with a love so great that nothing in all creation can ever separate us from it. Together, we’ve shared in that great love and because of that I will miss you. Presbyterian polity forbids me to have contact with you for at least a year after this morning, but they can’t stop me from praying for you! So I commit to praying for you, everyday, for at least a year. I pray that you will know God’s peace, the peace that surpasses understanding. I will pray for you always holding you in my heart with genuine love, and every time I gather around this Table within this next year, and in the years to come, I will remember our gathering today...celebrating God and the gift of our time serving together, sharing in love together, and most importantly praising our Prince of Peace who made it possible! Amen.

1. Mahlberg, Arden *Psyche & Spirit* November 2, 2010 Vol. 11, No 11