

“A Talking To”

Sermon for 17 September 2017

Texts: Psalm 103:1-5 and Ephesians 2:11-22

Sometimes your soul is needy. (In fact, I think oftener than we think.) Sometimes what your soul needs is a real talking to. Perhaps it is like an arm, which lacking circulation, simply goes numb—we call it “asleep”—we are so relieved when the circulation is restored and our arm is useful again. So it is, roughly speaking with the soul. For today, we have this verse: **For He Himself is our peace, who has made us one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . .** (v. 14). It speaks about **peace** and about a **dividing wall of hostility**. I want to put the latter on the table; let’s talk to our souls about ***dividing walls of hostility***. Paul is addressing the dividing wall of hostility which Christ took down, a wall that had been built up over the centuries between the Jews (“God’s Chosen people”) and the Gentiles (“the spiritually disadvantaged”). And we could walk away from this as a fine historical occurrence. Yes, there was a wall of hostility, but Jesus took care of that by dying on the cross. By virtue of his “work” on the cross, Jesus had taken from the Jew and the Gentile what divided them, and *in Himself* created an entirely new man—a third race, as it were, the race of them who are **in Him**. This phrase, **in Him**, or **in Christ** is one of Paul’s favorite ways of speaking about the accomplishments of Jesus Christ—namely bringing **peace** in Himself whereas before **hostility** was the defining property of Jewish/Gentile relationships.

While I might wish it otherwise, *dividing walls of hostility* are a dominant feature of our national life—our public discourse is riddled with *hostility*. Hostility is built by mistrust, suspicion, accusations of hate speech, bigotry, racism and any number of putative phobia’s. It is tragic that the word “phobia” ever escape the Pandora’s box of therapeutic terminology. *It used to describe severe psychosis, a clinically diagnosed and established mental condition now it is a derogatory terms projected onto anyone with whom you might have social, political, cultural or physical differences.* Those, like myself, who love language and like to see it used accurately, truthfully and well may hope that people will stop being so careless with such words—***but they won’t.*** However, we can still do something about it by refusing to treat real differences as psychological disabilities, or, more pointedly, mental deficiency/illness. While we are talking to our souls, we might want to consider how we talk about others as a topic!

Talking to our souls. I came across a Christian blog, Ginger Ciminello posted Oct. 3, 2013) in response to **My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn**(Psalm 57:7-8):

“David demonstrates reliance upon God, but he also makes a choice when it comes to his emotions. David chooses to praise God in the midst of terror. He commands himself, “Don’t sleep through this! Don’t trust your heart, trust God! Get up and get moving!” David’s heart might have been telling him to hide, to distrust God (after all, wasn’t David SUPPOSED to be the King?), and to even check out for a while. Instead, David knew how important it was to be awake and alert.

The Hebrew word translated awake means “wake, life up (self), stir up (self).” (Rotschild)

I’m not saying it’s easy, and I’m certainly not saying that this is my usual behavior. I just want to point out the example of David. He’s worn out from the fight and yet he commands his soul to praise the Lord. His attitude and response are his choice. Your attitude and response in the midst of exhaustion are your choice.”

Ginger is onto something here¹. Psalm 57:9-11 continues: **I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.** Now, for our purposes, I want to cite Psalm 103:1-5 (ESV):

- 1 **Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!**
- 2 **Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,**
- 3 **who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,**
- 4 **who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,**
- 5 **who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

Both of these psalms speak to the same point: glorifying God through praise—and that blesses God. Matthew 5:16: **In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that [a Let your light so shine before others that] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.** The “light” here is the light in your house—so that we get the idea of “let the light of your godly household so shine,” rather than taking the verse to be one of individual “works”—as in a house shining in the darkness of the night. Obvious, apparent, noticeable.

To attain this, we speak to our soul, saying, “Soul, cause me to so speak, and think and do so that God is glorified in everything! I desire that His Name be exalted, magnified, made great through all that I am! ***This blesses God.*** I am trying to describe how blessing exceeds praising—everything that God has created “praises” Him but it is to us alone that it falls to bless God. God does not need our blessing (He is the source of all blessings) but it pleases Him when we do bless Him. It pleases God that we want to please Him—to serve Him gladly, eagerly, joyfully.

¹ On a personal note, Ginger added: “That’s the verse I’m memorizing this week. (Psalm 57:8) The reason I am claiming this verse today isn’t because I pulled out my harp when I got out of bed. I identify with this verse because I don’t always awake full of the courage or desire to live out the joy of the Cross. Heck, I very rarely wake up with desire to do much of anything except plot when I can next take a nap or go to sleep.”

Talking to our souls . . . talking about the walls of hostility. Well, in our text, **He Himself is our peace** comes before **the dividing wall of hostility**. We should keep that order. **He Himself is our peace**. Speak that to your soul. Bring up **peace**, and bring up Him as *our peace*—THEN put them together! Say, “Hey, Soul, did you hear that? What does sentence that mean? What do you make of that? Haven’t you read in Micah 5:5 that “Peace” is another name for God: **And He shall be their peace**. Who’s that He? It is the Messiah, *himself*, who **shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord, he shall be great**. Your soul might respond, “Yeah, I read that alright, but I wasn’t paying attention. I must have been asleep!” **Exactly! Are you awake now?!** Why, my soul, that is as much to say, “God is our peace” as to say that “Jesus is God.” *Now, isn’t that an amazing connection?!* It puts this verse with all the “I am” sayings of Jesus in John’s gospel. Another intriguing, self-identifying piece of revelation!

Do you recognize the little biblical meditation we just did? We meditated on **He Himself is our peace** in everyone’s hearing. And thus we have demonstrated that biblical meditation is neither Yoga, or TM (transcendental meditation), nor even “a relaxation exercise!” Finding a mantra, or emptying the mind are not even part of biblical meditation. It’s more like a work out, like the starting of something by which we fill, refine, recast and **work the Word in deeper**. And you don’t even have to make up stuff! The verses are there—like dumbbells lined up on the floor—pick it up, take a breath. **Are you awake?** *Exercise that quickened soul*. Remember, the sleeping hunter rarely snags the stag!

Are you awake, eager and expectant, yet? Here’s another spiritual exercise: “The Lord Jesus is a deep sea of joy: my soul shall dive in and shall be swallowed up in the delights of his company.” Okay, soul, suit up and take the plunge!

Or, try on this: “It is folly to think the Lord provides grace for every trouble but the one you are in today.” Really, soul, what are you thinking now?! Or this: “Happier to be chained in a dungeon with Paul than to reign in a palace with an Ahab.” Yes, that’s right! You know, soul, that’s right. Am I in a dungeon, or a palace, right now? (These quotes are from C. H. Spurgeon. I sure am glad for him!)

Awake my soul! or **Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!** for **He Himself is our peace**. Exhort your soul, *with such words*, to magnify the Lord. What does *magnify* mean? It means, let’s agree to move beyond the praise phase to the phase of blessing. Observation: we are familiar/comfortable with saying “God bless you” to people. But what if we were to season our “God bless you’s” with the exclamation, “May God be blessed!” “I sure hope things work out—may God be blessed.” Or “What do you want to accomplish on this trip? May God be blessed.” May God be blessed by what I say, and think and do. Both praise and blessing express a soul’s sincere gratitude and that is a truly great thing.

We bless God for blessing us. **For He Himself is our peace, who has made us one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . v. 14** This verse brings us face to face with the supreme blessing Jesus is as **our peace**. By what he did **in his flesh**, that is throughout his earthly ministry, but most supremely on the cross—through the crucifixion, dying for sin, making atonement for sinners—we

have come into an unity, **in Christ**. We have come into a oneness, in him, that is not possible outside of a shared relationship with him. We may share a common humanity outside of Christ, but what we share together **in Christ** that is the real, new and splendid thing by which he blessed us. *That's the blessing!*

Trying to wrap our minds around the **dividing wall of hostility** it may be helpful to picture the Berlin Wall which separated the West from the former Soviet Union, or the Communist block. It was a real barrier. It had concertina wire, or razor wire on it and it was guarded by armed guards who would shoot persons trying to escape from the communist side. It was a defensive wall, a wall for holding people in as much as for holding others out. The Berlin Wall was made of steel and concrete. However, backing all that up was the hostility between the East and West, between the Communist and the so-called Free World. The Berlin Wall is from much more recent history than the **dividing wall of hostility** to which Paul refers—the cultural and religious barrier constructed by Jewish lawyers, known as the Mosaic Law. That wall separated the Jews from everyone else: the Gentiles. Yes, it was the very familiar “us” against “them” dynamic all over again. The world divided into friends and enemies, into the people of God and the sinners—or the righteous and everyone else. We are very conversant with this dynamic. It is the magic of name-calling that automatically divides people into us and them, into those who are in and those who are out—and it would be child’s play if it were not “suped-up” into “identity politics.” *Identity politics* is an ugly, hostile thing. It is diversity gone septic! It is a hateful social poison that builds walls, divides communities and, yes, even whole countries. And it creates such a turbulent, hate-filled and dangerous mess that it is all too easy to resonate with Rodney King’s plaintive cry, “*Can’t we all just get along?*”

When everything around us seems to declare, “No. We can’t,” it is wonderful to hear, “Yes, In Christ we can be one” . . . we can drop the hostility, refuse to hate and tear down the walls that resentment, grievance, entitlement and racial pride have built. We do this by “talking it over” with our soul first. Then, we proceed to fly it by Jesus! “Do I need to be hurt, offended or affronted by name-calling, by being accused of being ‘racist?’” No. No one makes me a racist by labelling, by stereotyping me! ***I am not a racist because I am a Christian.*** Who I am in Christ, because of Who He is in me, has demolished that **dividing wall!**

It’s even better than that! The cry for justice behind the entry protests *has already been answered.* Justice is waiting for us to pick it up *and to live it out.* When Jesus died for our sins, justice was answered, fully satisfied. ***But, just because we know that doesn’t mean that anyone else does—they must be told . . . be brought up to speed. In Christ, justice reigns and rules!*** Additionally, our real guilt, for real sin—for all our transgressions, all our stinky attitudes towards God and towards each other—including the *racism of former generations of all races involved!*—all those sins were summed up, put in one pile and the verdict (“Guilty!”) was passed by God. Punishment ensued! So, when we declare that Jesus died to the sins of the world, we do mean the entire world, without exception. When all sin, there is no sin that was not addressed. So when we sing “Jesus paid it all,” that is precisely what we mean and that rumble that

you hear in the background? That is the wall of hostility, the wall between God and man, tumbling down—collapsing, turning into dust and rubble. And all that was God’s doing².

And lest I be accused of casting this matter too broadly, or too far afield(!), I would remind everyone that this truth, **He Himself is our Peace**, is both universally and personally applicable. In a broken marriage, before the two can be reconciled, both partners, separately, or together must get right with God. For the cause of divorce is not the fighting, incompatibility, or, as we put it so *delicately* “irreconcilable differences.” No, the leak in the boat is our separation from God, our alienation through sin, rebellion or pride, from the purposes of God in the marriage. When one partner realizes the immensity of his own sinfulness it is easier to tone down the accusatory and critical language, **breaking down the wall of hostility**—it is easier to humbly seek peace and even to fixate on what is good, true and beautiful about his wife. And, vice versa! Talk to your soul about that “hurtful” remark, or action! Than as Jesus, “Do I need to be hurt, or offended here?” What happens if Jesus says, “I’ll cover that offense.” Or what if He says, “I actually covered that on the cross and shed my blood so that you can have my peace . . . end the hostility, forgive and enjoy each other freely. Take a credit from my account and apply it to yourself and your marriage.” The forgiveness is in the bank, my friend, take a withdrawal! Fill your heart with forgiveness and then forgive one another!

What if “irreconcilable differences” don’t even exist in the Kingdom of God? Would that be a step-up in terms of your neighborhood? Leave the war zone! Take down the barricades! Open the door of your heart, that the Prince of Peace may enter!

Psalm 24:7-10 (ESV)

7 **Lift up your heads, O gates!**
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
 8 **Who is this King of glory?**
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!
 9 **Lift up your heads, O gates!**
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

² I’m sure that some, in fact most of you, just completed a bible memory, “round trip to Jericho.” You do remember that ancient city with immense, impregnable walls? (Walls guarded by insolent French peas may be your most recent version!) Seriously, if you didn’t capture the sense that *from our side*, as a result of our unaided human efforts, those walls were going nowhere, *you missed the point of the story!* But, in the end, with a mighty shout—**dare I suggest, a shout of praise**, the whole structure imploded and the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. What we could not accomplish for ourselves, God accomplished for us in the person, in the flesh of Jesus Christ. And this seemingly insignificant event, in an obscure corner of the known world, the public execution of a Jewish peasant preacher man was the most important happening in the entire course of human history. I say, in the death, because that is where settlement was reached—between man and God—the offense was removed once for all. Indeed, once there was peace between man and God then, and only then was it possible for peace to come between man and man.

10 Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

To those who are still making war, in heart, or home, or country, who have never known anything but hostility and hatred, boy, do we ever have great news for you! The armistice has been signed, our long warfare is over—in fact it ended several millennia ago. It ended with the death of Jesus Christ, our crucified King and Lord. He is **full of benefits, forgives all our iniquities, heals all our diseases . . . who redeems our lives from the pit** (from total destruction), **who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy**. You know, I trust, that there is this wonderful inversion between here and heaven. Here very few wear crowns, but in heaven no one goes without one! This same Jesus **fills our souls with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's**. God refused to simply save us—as if that were the bare and essential thing—he crowns us, puts on the best robe and a ring and sandals—he welcomes us royally home! And this refreshing is not simply a one time deal—like that super bargain you had to have on Black Friday last!—no, over and over again, as regular as the waves of the very returning tides God ministers grace, and strength and health to our souls.

Amen.