

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS PEACE LIKE A RIVER DECEMBER 24 2009
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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On the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem, angels appeared to shepherds on the hillside and sang:

GLORY TO GOD IN HIGHEST HEAVEN,
AND ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL AMONG ALL PEOPLE.

Towards the end of his life here on earth Jesus said to his disciples in John 14:27:

PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU; MY PEACE I GIVE TO YOU. I DO NOT GIVE TO YOU AS THE WORLD GIVES. DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED, AND DO NOT LET THEM BE AFRAID.

Let us pray.

Do you know anyone who is always a peaceful, non- anxious presence in your life?
Can you think of someone who brings you feelings of peace just by being around them?

I have a friend who is a retired United Methodist minister who is always a peaceful non- anxious presence in my life. When I am around him I find myself slowing down, breathing deeply, relaxing and trusting more in God, and feeling more at peace myself.

I think Jesus was like that. Jesus lived his whole life with such a deep sense of trust in God that he simply radiated peace to all those around him.

When Jesus was born, angels announced his birth by singing "Glory to God and on earth peace, good will to all people". Jesus came into the world from God to bring peace and good will among all people.

Then, as Jesus neared the end of his life here on earth, he said to his disciples and to us:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.

I think it is interesting that the first words spoken about Jesus when he was born were words about peace on earth and the last words Jesus spoke before he left this world were words about living in peace with each other.

Perhaps the most important gift Jesus brings to us is the gift of inner peace, peace in our families and peace in our world. What the world needs now is peace.

Jesus said: PEACE I LEAVE WITH YOU. MY PEACE I GIVE TO YOU....DO NOT LET YOUR HEARTS BE TROUBLED AND DO NOT LET THEM BE AFRAID.

Every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous begins with this prayer from Reinhold Niebuhr about peace.

GOD, GRANT ME THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
THE COURAGE TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN
AND THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.

When we accept the things we cannot change then we will experience peaceful serenity.

What are some of the things we cannot change?

We can't change the bodies into which we were born. We can take care of them and keep them healthy but we can't change the fundamental bodies in which we live and move and have our being.

So many people are unhappy with the body God gave them and therefore discontent with their lives. They may not like the way they look, their size, shape or the age of their bodies. As we grow older we particularly have trouble accepting our aging bodies. When my mother was growing older and had health issues she often said: GROWING OLD IS NOT FOR SISSIES.

However, the body we live in even when it is aging is something we cannot change and when we can accept it as it is we will discover greater serenity and peace in our lives. Accept the things we cannot change.

I have been on a journey to accept the body God gave me. My dad was taller than I am; he was just over six feet tall, but he was bald. My mother's father and her brothers were all short but they all had a full head of hair. In fact, my grandfather died one week before his 100th birthday and he still had a full head of hair.

So I could have been born tall like my dad and with a full head of hair like my grandfather. But instead of being born tall with a full head of hair I was born short and bald. I used to think I got the worst of both sides of my family.

When I first fell in love with Minnietta, I realized that she was taller than me and I thought she would never date a shorter guy like me. But she said, "Yes," when I first asked her out and my height didn't seem to bother her and her love and acceptance helped me to accept the body that I cannot change.

Have you ever wished that God had given you a different body? The truth is that all of us live in the body God chose for us so we need to love and accept it as a special gift from God to us.

And when we fully accept this body God gave us and care for it as a special gift from God, we will find ourselves living with a greater sense of peace and acceptance.

God grant us the peace to accept the things we cannot change.

Another aspect of our lives that we cannot change is the family into which we were born. We didn't choose our family; we just showed up in it. We can choose our friends but we can't choose our family.

I know that tonight and tomorrow many families will gather together for food and fellowship as they celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. For many families this will be a wonderful time of love and sharing.

I know that many of you have loved ones who have been away from home for awhile and you are delighted that they are here with you.

However, I am also aware that not all families live together in peace and harmony. I am aware that there is sometimes tension when family members get together for the Christmas holidays. Some members of a family may disagree with each other, or carry resentments over past hurts. Not all family gatherings around the Christmas meal are filled with joy and celebration.

When I was growing up, we always got together with my mother's six brothers and sisters and their children for Christmas dinner. There would usually be about 30 to 40 people gathered at my grandparent's home for Christmas.

It was not always a peaceful gathering. Most of my mother's family are ardent and devout members of the Church of Christ non-piano playing branch and firmly believe that anyone who is not a member of that church will not go to heaven. And anyone who worships in a church where there are pianos or organs is definitely condemned because pianos and organs are not mentioned in the Bible. There were other members of our family who did not go to any church, and our family attended the United Methodist Church.

When I was in seminary I became a little bit arrogant and pretty proud of my knowledge of the Bible and theology. When I came home for the big Christmas celebration, I would get involved in arguments with my Church of Christ uncles about Biblical texts and beliefs about salvation whether or not God will condemn people who use pianos in worship. Sometimes we would get into pretty heated arguments and no one ever changed their minds on anything.

After our Christmas debates were over I never felt good about it and regretted that I had participated in such un-Christ like behavior in debating with my uncles about our Loving God. I talked about a loving God but I did not demonstrate God's love that comes to us in Jesus to my uncles. I really liked my uncles and we enjoyed playing cards and other games together but if we got onto religious topics there would be an argument and we would all feel bad about it.

I asked my mother about it and she just said: "I just love them and accept them as my brothers; I don't need to fix them or change them; I just love them for who they are." What a radical idea!

When I started simply accepting my uncles and not arguing with them about their beliefs, we had a great deal more peace at our Christmas dinners and I came to love them and enjoy just being with them. The last time we were together we remembered our family members who had passed away, told old family stories, laughed our sides off and just enjoyed each other. I think we have all come to the place where we just love and accept each other and aren't trying to fix or correct each other.

We came to accept the things we cannot change and in that acceptance found great peace.

I suspect that many more families would be happier and more peaceful at Christmas if we would all simply accept each other and love each other as we are rather than trying to change or fix someone.

You see, peace comes when we can accept the people around us as children of God. We don't have to change, criticize, or critique our family members- just accept and love them as they are and we will all experience a peace that passes understanding.

Jesus said: MY PEACE I GIVE UNTO YOU. The peace of Jesus is also the peace that comes in surrendering ourselves to God.

Frequently, our problem is that we really want to be in charge of life. We would really like to be in control of our lives and the lives of those around us so we can make things come out the way we want them to. We would really like to be God ourselves.

However, the problem is that we are not God. We are not the ones in charge of this world so when we try to control life or the people around us, we mess it up and cause great conflict.

There is a great sense of peace that comes when we are able to let go and let God.

Someone once put it this way: why should we do the will of God rather than our own will? The answer: because the will of God works and ours doesn't.

When we simply follow our own will and our own ego, we make life unbearable for ourselves and for others. E. G. O. means "Edging God Out" and when we edge God out of our lives and let our egos and our pride gain control, we will always live in conflict with the egos and pride of the other people around us. We will never live in peace when we allow our egos to rule our lives.

The only way to deal with our desire to be in charge is to do what Jesus did: surrender ourselves, our egos, our lives and our concerns into the loving hands of God.

I often encourage the people of our congregation to take all of their problems and concerns out of their minds, put them in their hands and then turn their hands over and surrender themselves and their concerns into the hands of God. It is amazing the peace we experience when we let go of control and surrender ourselves into the hands of God like Jesus did.

Jesus said: MY PEACE I GIVE UNTO YOU.

Jesus gave his peace to us and he invites us to follow his example and give peace to all those around us.

Lynne McTaggart has written a book entitled *THE POWER OF INTENTION* in which she reports on the hundreds of scientific studies which show the power of our intentions, prayers and meditations to make a positive difference in the world. She says that every thought, every intention, every prayer we make creates a small beam of energy that we send out into the world.

If we have positive intentions, loving thoughts and compassionate prayers to God towards other people then we send positive energy, life and love into their lives and it makes a transforming difference in their lives. Conversely, when we send out negative intentions, hateful thoughts and judgmental prayers into the world it will have a negative effect on lives of people around us.

Lynne reports on studies which have been done where 50 to 100 people who are experienced in prayer and meditation, came to an inner city neighborhood church where there is a high rate of crime and violence. They spent several hours in praying together for peace in that community. They simply surrendered themselves to God, got into a deep meditative state and focused on the word "peace" for that neighborhood for hours at a time.

Then they asked for the police reports for the day on which they were praying for peace in that community. Every time they have tried this experiment they have discovered that the crime rate and the number of police calls decline on the day when there is a group praying for peace in that neighborhood. There is even a residual affect and the crime rate may not return to its former rate until several days later. These studies have been done in many places on many different occasions so it is hard to say that these declines in the crime rate are just chance occurrences.

Think about that! This means that when we surrender ourselves into the hands of God, God makes us channels of God's peace in our community. And the more people who are involved in becoming channels of God's peace the greater the affect on a community of people.

The question is whether or not we are people who bring prayers of peace and love to the world around us or thoughts of conflict and hate to the world.

Our families, our community, our nation and our world will live in peace with each other when more of us bring prayers for peace and love to the world than are bringing thoughts of hostility and hatred to the world.

The patron saint for living in peace in the world is St. Francis of Assisi, Italy. I know you have heard his prayer before but have you ever thought about putting it into practice tonight.

Saint Francis prayed:

LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF THY PEACE. Ask yourself, am I an instrument, a channel of the peace of God, to my family and all those around me or am I an instrument of conflict to the people around me.

WHERE THERE IS HATRED, LET ME SOW LOVE. Can you think of a place where there is hatred in this world; can we plant the seeds of love by our thoughts and prayers?

WHERE THERE IS INJURY, PARDON. Can you think of someone who has hurt or injured you in some way? Can you pardon them, forgive them and let it go?

WHERE THERE IS DOUBT, FAITH. Can you think of someone who is full of fear and doubts? How can you be a model of faith and trust in God?

WHERE THERE IS DESPAIR, HOPE. Do you know someone who is despairing because of the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or in despair over alienation in a family? How can you think thoughts and do actions which might bring them hope?

WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS, LIGHT. Can you think of someone in the darkness because of a lack of direction and meaning in their lives? Can you think of a way to bring them the light and hope?

WHERE THERE IS SADNESS, JOY. Can you think of someone who is filled with sadness over the loss of a loved one or the loss of a marriage? How can you be a channel of joy in their lives?

It is amazing to me that just praying peaceful prayers and thinking peaceful thoughts of peace, love, forgiveness, faith, hope, light and joy creates an energy that brings these qualities into the world.

We will live in peace within ourselves and among others when we think peaceful thoughts and pray peaceful prayers for others.

When someone asks why we don't have peace in our world, I say: Are you praying for peace and good will among all people? Are you thinking peaceful, loving thoughts towards others? The simple reason that we don't have a peaceful world is that we don't have enough people praying peaceful prayers and thinking peaceful thoughts.

It is not God's fault we don't live in peace, it is humanity's fault for thinking more hateful thoughts than hopeful thoughts and more pessimistic thoughts than peaceful thoughts.

As we think so we become; when we are at war, it is because we as a human race have not decided to think, pray and live in peace with each other.

Whenever someone goes into surgery, I pray for them and then I ask them to simply say the word "peace" as they are wheeled down the hall into surgery. When we are going into surgery it is easy for us to become filled with fear and anxiety about what might happen.

I think our cells listen to our thoughts. When we are thinking thoughts of fear and anxiety, then our cells listen in on those thoughts and they become filled with fear and anxiety because that is what they picked up from the boss of the body.

However, when we think thoughts of peace, our cells pick up that message as well, and they relax and when they are relaxed, we do better with the surgery.

Everybody wants peace; if you ask anyone they would say they want to live in peace in their families, in our nation and in our world. However, peace will not happen in our families, nation and world until we think peaceful thoughts and pray more peaceful prayers.

Last year a company of military police officers from Danville, Indiana was sent to serve as military police in Bagdad, Iraq. As these military police patrolled the streets of Bagdad, they would see dozens of little children playing in the streets and living in poverty. They realized that these little children were just like their own kids they had left behind in Indiana. These little kids were not the terrorists or the enemy; they were just little kids caught in a war zone and living in danger.

I like to imagine that these military police officers had loving, compassionate and peaceful thoughts towards these children living in poverty and danger.

They wanted to do something to help these children so they requested that their families and friends send them stuffed animals, toys and candy to give to these children on the streets. It would not only be a blessing to the children but it would help them see that the American soldiers were there to protect them and care for them.

Last year we had a reverse offering where we gave out \$20 bills and asked people to take this money and do something good with it. Two sisters, one in the sixth grade and one in the fourth grade each took a \$20 bill and wanted to do something good with it.

These girls are part of a Girl Scout troop in Carmel and their troop was collecting stuffed animals, toys and candy to send to the military police officers from Danville.

Their troop and many others collected 1,000 boxes of stuffed animals, candy and toys to be sent to the military police officers in Iraq to distribute to the Iraqi children on the streets. However, the group in charge of this project didn't have enough funds to pay for the shipment of these gifts, so these two girls gave the money they got from the church, and other gifts were added to it so they could ship all of these gifts overseas.

This past week, a woman from the group that shipped the gifts from Danville stopped by the church to give us this flag and certificate as a way of thanking this congregation and those girls for paying for the shipment of those 1,000 boxes to Iraq. Here is the American flag they gave us and the certificate which reads:

THIS FLAG WAS FLOWN OVER THE FORWARD OPERATING BASE IN RUSTAMIYAH, BAGDAD, IRAQ ON JANUARY 6TH 2009 DURING A TIME OF HOSTILE FIRE AND BEARS WITNESS TO THE SUPPRESSION OF TERRORIST FORCES. IT IS PRESENTED TO ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FOR OUTSTANDING SUPPORT TO THE 38TH MILITARY POLICE COMPANY, DANVILLE, INDIANA

This experience made me realize that even in the midst of conflict we can all offer peaceful thoughts and actions to those around us. I like to imagine those military police officers from Indiana walking through the streets of Bagdad with compassionate thoughts toward the children around them and giving out gifts to those children as a way of making peace. These soldiers who are in harm's way and whose lives are at risk, helped to become channels of God's peace on earth by their compassionate actions towards these children and by their resistance to terrorists.

One of my favorite songs ends with these words:

LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME.

Peace on earth could begin here tonight- in this sanctuary if the hundreds of people attending these worship services would stop themselves when they think negative, hostile, hateful thoughts and replace them with hopeful, peaceful, loving thoughts and prayers. Peace could begin with us if we pray peace-filled prayers and think loving peaceful thoughts towards all the people around us in this world.

During the four Sundays of Advent, we sang *I'VE GOT HOPE LIKE A RAINBOW, I'VE GOT FAITH LIKE A MOUNTAIN, I'VE GOT JOY LIKE A FOUNTAIN, I'VE GOT LOVE LIKE AN OCEAN AND TONIGHT WE CONCLUDE BY SINGING I'VE GOT PEACE LIKE A RIVER.*

PRAYER

SILENT NIGHT and candle lighting