

“Seek Peace and Pursue It”

21st Weekend after Pentecost – October 28/29, 2006

Sermon Background Study

1 Peter 3:8-12; 4:7-11 (NRSV)

⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For

“Those who desire life

and desire to see good days,

let them keep their tongues from evil

and their lips from speaking deceit;

¹¹let them turn away from evil and do good;

let them seek peace and pursue it.

¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,

and his ears are open to their prayer.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”¹

⁷The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. ⁸Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

The peace that we seek and is God's desire for us can be found only in a serious, disciplined, and loving commitment to God and one another.

The truth is that peace eludes us. Despite Jesus' repeated reassurances that God can take care of us just as well as he takes care of the flowers, we are an anxiety-ridden people. Granted, we live in a difficult and dangerous world where a little anxiety is understandable. Yet, when hasn't this been the case? I remember hiding from Russian A-bombs under my desk in junior high school. And lately, I've been reading a bit about the American Civil War. It is hard for me to even imagine the anxieties and fears and divisions that Americans must have felt in 1861.² For too many of us, inner peace is never more than an unrealized dream.

Certainly, the Christians to whom Peter writes had good reason to be anxious and fearful. They were ostracized by the communities in which they had grown up and lived. Many were shunned even by their families. After coming to faith in Jesus Christ, these people found themselves to be aliens, strangers in a familiar

1 Peter

Writing from Rome (see the reference to “Babylon” in 5:13) in the early 60's AD, Peter encourages the Christians in Asia Minor who “have had to suffer various trials” (1:6) and are living as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). He reminds them that they are “a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people” called to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9).

These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are “people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”¹

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the NT world, a social world driven by status and community, a world in which the goal of life was to acquire honor and avoid shame. It is hard thing for us to grasp the societal alienation that came with a commitment to Christ in the first centuries after Jesus.

In the face of such trials, Peter urges Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (4:13). How are the Christians to respond to their persecutors? Peter writes, “Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing.” (3:9). Peter even goes so far as to instruct these believers to “Honor the Emperor” (2:17).

1. Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans. This is an excellent survey text on the New Testament.

¹In verses 10-12, Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12-16

²Here is a tidbit that illustrates my point. In the presidential election of 1860, not a single popular vote was cast for Abraham Lincoln in five southern states! Not one. Not even by accident. Despite the blogosphere, we hardly know how extreme politics can get. Feelings may be heated in Washington right now, but we haven't seen one senator beat another nearly to death on the floor of the Senate, as Charles Sumner was in 1856. Our times are difficult, but it could be much worse.

land.³ They had not been sent into exile, they had chosen it for themselves. Yet, Peter urges them not to return the hurts, but to love and to serve, to seek peace and pursue it.⁴

Pursuing peace

The peace we seek won't come by accident; we won't stumble onto it or discover it thrust upon us. Rather, Peter reminds us that the pursuit of peace takes seriousness and discipline. Indeed, Peter calls the Christians to disciplined lives three times in this short letter (1:13; 4:7; 5:8). Now, this isn't about

leading stern, joyless lives. But it is about seriousness of purpose and the application of our time, talents, gifts, and services to the work of God's kingdom.

Our Peace

Peace so often eludes us. We find ourselves to be anxious and uncertain, unsure of where to turn next or how to go about finding the life we seek. The ancient Jews understood that the peace we seek can be found only in our relationship with God. They had a word for this: *shalom*. It cannot be translated with a single word. *Shalom* is prosperity, health, peace, wellness, completeness, safety, harmony, satisfaction, fulfillment, unity, victory, restoration.

Though we usually think of peace in the sense of our own inner peace, *shalom* for the ancient Jews was often a relational word, nearly synonymous with justice. It was about two persons living in an equitable, often covenantal, relationship. Thus, in the Old Testament, *shalom* can come when a payment is made or an obligation is met, for equity is restored between the two parties. Payment of the tithe, what was to be returned to God, was crucial to maintaining the Israelites' covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Simply put, *shalom* is the restoration of wholeness. It is well-being and is bound up with our relationship with God. Only when we love God and love neighbor, which is the heart of that relationship and which is grounded in action, can we find the peace we seek and that God desires for us.

But we cannot expect to find this peace so long as we hold back any portion of ourselves or our life, as if what matters is only our time or our talents and not our money. And it won't come if we give from the leftovers, rather than from the first fruits of our work. The wholeness that is *shalom* is just that, encompassing all that we are and have, holding nothing back.

Grabbing an occasional bit of Bible reading when we have a spare moment or two won't get us where we want to go. The same goes for haphazard prayers and for worshipping when it is convenient. And it is just as true when it comes to our money. Giving out of our leftovers is never going to help us to grow in our faith or to find the peace we seek. Rather, growing to maturity in our Christian life takes disciplined prayer, regular Bible reading, rain-or-shine worshipping, loving service, sacrificial giving, and so on.

Good stewards, serving one another

In 4:10, Peter urges the Christians to be good stewards of God's grace, serving each other with whatever gifts God has given them, understanding that their ability to serve at all comes from God's strength, not their own.

Our life at St. Andrew is to be just this – mutually encouraging, serving, and caring. We are to represent the life of God to each other. PHEME PERKINS writes, "Passages like this one remind Christians today that faith requires community. Believers should be active members of local churches that are gathered for prayer, for mutual support, for celebration. They are also reminded that local churches should be places in which all members of the church share the particular gifts that God has given them."⁵

As we've seen vividly in the many puzzle pieces that have been filled out, St. Andrew is such a church. God has blessed us with many gifts and we return those gifts to God, using them to serve not only each other, but neighbors and strangers all over the world. But sometimes we need to be reminded that because we work from God's strength, not our own, serving one another becomes an act of worship⁶ and the path to peace.

³Contrary to what many Christians believe, there was no empire-wide persecution of Christians until about 250AD. Instead, in the first centuries of the church's life, persecutions were localized and varied in intensity from time and place to place. Even the horrific persecutions of Nero in the mid-60's were limited to Rome. Still, most Christians, at one time or another, were persecuted (1) for their unwillingness to worship Caesar, and/or (2) their "anti-family" philosophy, and/or (3) their strange religious practices. Roman governors were focused on keeping the peace and because the Christians tended to stir things up, though it was not always of their own doing, they were often at odds with the authorities. Rumors and legends about the Christians' weird practices made them easy and tempting targets.

⁴If you look at 3:11, you'll see that, being a quotation from a psalm, this is Hebrew poetry. Their poetry was not about rhyming sounds but rhyming thoughts. Each two-line couplet is a single idea, expressed in two different ways. Thus, in verse 11, turning from evil and doing good parallels seeking peace and pursuing it. In these studies, I've often talked about Christian love being about the doing, not the feeling. Here, the pursuit of peace is grounded in doing good.

⁵From her commentary on 1 & 2 Peter, James, and Jude in the *Interpretation* series.

⁶In the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the common Greek word *proskyneo* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians used only the Greek word for serving, *latreuo*. In the words of Peter, we serve "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

October 29 - November 4

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Sunday A day for reflection and catching up	Monday A day for reflection and catching up
Tuesday A day for reflection and catching up	Wednesday Ezekiel 20-23; Psalm 123-124 Judah's history justifies the coming destruction; the tragic tale of two sisters tells the same story
Thursday Ezekiel 24-26; Psalm 125-126 The coming losses will be too great for grief; messages from God for Judah's neighboring foes	Friday Ezekiel 27-30; Psalm 127 Messages against Sidon and Egypt
Saturday Ezekiel 31-34; Psalm 128-129 more on Egypt; the fall of Jerusalem; with chapter 34, we turn to the restoration of Israel, what Block has called "the gospel according to Ezekiel"	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewccl.org.

Scott's October Book Recommendation

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

This is the first time I've recommended a book that I've only begun to read myself. Yancey's new book on prayer has just been published and, based on what I've read so far, it is just as thoughtful and thought-provoking as the rest of his books. In his latest, Yancey asks the questions about prayer that we all ask. Does prayer work? Does it work the way we think it should? What can we really expect from prayer? I've been excited about this book since I first learned that it was coming and I'm confident we'll all get a lot out of it.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Peter's emphasis in today's Scripture passages is the mutuality of the Christian community. Each person at St. Andrew is part of this community. We are all empowered by God to love one another and to serve one another, all of which glorifies God.

The puzzle pieces that so many people took a minute to fill out exemplify this. Each of us took a moment to consider what we love about St. Andrew, who has meant a lot to our spiritual life, what we'd like St. Andrew to do or be in the future, and, today, what financial commitment we'll make to see that our church moves forward.

You might take a few minutes to talk about your responses on the puzzle pieces. Share what you love about St. Andrew. Make sure people know who has helped you in your Christian journey. Discuss how we at St. Andrew can be even better stewards of God's grace. How could we be more disciplined in our spiritual practices? How might we learn to love one another more fully or serve one another more gladly? How could we better see that all this comes from God? Frankly, the people at St. Andrew are a talented bunch and it is easy to imagine that the growth of this loving community has been because of our own gifts and strength. But Peter reminds us that if we are to build as God would have us build, we must do so from God's strength, not our own.