

## That Song of Peace on Earth

That song of peace on earth...the one that the angels sang to the shepherds in the fields and which have become part of many of the carols we sing at Christmas...the derived from the verses that appear on Christmas cards we send hoping for peace to come in the lives of friends and family...those wishes we make...the ones we sigh over and then put away with the decorations at Epiphany, if not before...do we ever consider if we have missed an important part of the message given to us about peace being sent in the song and the teachings of Jesus that God wants us to know? This past year of 2020 has been a challenging one in many ways. There have disasters almost without number in terms of sickness, in terms of fires and floods. It has also brought the divisions which are present among us painfully and bitterly to the front of every newspaper and TV news broadcast which has proclaimed those divisions. In the midst of all this there seems to be some very disturbing tendencies about our understanding of the meaning of words...not foreign words and their translations which have nuances which can easily lead to misunderstandings...but some basic English words we use every day. As the corona virus spread and public health measures were called for, people were urged to “social distance”. What was being urged was for people to maintain a physical distance of six feet away from each other...for the measuring of a distance of two arm lengths. In a way, that is encourages some social distancing, since speaking across that amount of space is not what we usually do comfortably in “social” situations, those occasions we gather with friends and family, yet conversations are still very possible at that distance. But true social distancing has already occurred in a much more profound way...a physical distance of six feet does not stop us from talking with one another...even with the addition of the recommended mask wearing if we are actually in one another’s company. However, what has occurred over the last several years is that many people have begun “talking” only through “social media” sites through the use of computers. People have begun selecting and choosing their “friends” without ever having actually met them. Many folks have begun to exchange opinions and thoughts through the use of their keyboards. They send these thoughts out into the universe without regard to their truth or any consequence that they have. Other folks read these messages, and respond to them without questioning their truth or the source, and then repeat them. And the cycle is of what is now called an echo chamber or silo continues and grows. Because the tendency is to only “like” and repeat and spread those things with which the reader, this friend they now have agrees. Many are only interacting with those who say the same things. This type of social interaction is a new phenomenon and one that is not really one that works well with the type of beings that God created us to be. From the earliest traditions of faith that we have, the communications that God has made with us, the impetus has been for us to live together in community...in community where the welfare of all was considered to be the concern of all. That was the message in the commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai, it was the ignoring of those commandments that led to all the disasters that befell the people of Israel, and which really are at the root of the problems which beset us today...because the teachings of Jesus were those which explained how those instructions of God were to be enacted and lived so that all could live an abundant life...that was also in the message...that God loves us so much he came to personally instruct us in how we were to live and offer us forgiveness...grace for our failures. There have always been instructions given for how to interact with the “other” in our

midst. In the letter written to the Ephesians, a community of believers who came to faith in Christ largely from outside the Jewish tradition, there were many problems and issues with those who came to faith in Christ from within the Jewish tradition. It seems that neither side was able to talk to or understand the other....sound familiar? In this letter, Paul speaks of God's plan to restore all things by gathering them together in Jesus Christ. The extensive praise sentence which opens this letters speaks of the many blessings believers have received through Christ; the choice God made before the foundation of the world through love to claim these people through adoption into an inheritance given to the Jewish people. In verse 10 and 11 Paul says "as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to his counsel and will, so that we who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory." It's a vision of unity, wholeness, and peace, for the whole human family. But when you look at the human family in our day, you have to wonder how we can even begin to conceive what that kind of peace would look like...with everyone gathered together as one. But that does seem to be what the song of the angels was about. Today, as I described is evident by our news sources and social media platforms, we are divided by politics, divided by religion, divided by race, and divided by violence that runs rampant through this human family of ours. Can we really imagine unity, wholeness and peace—between Republicans and Democrats, between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, between Jewish settlers and Palestinian settlers, between tribal warlords and others who wreak havoc all over the globe? I think in fact with the current state of things, with all these different groups of people who are so at odds with each other, many of them in our own country, some of them who even hate each other enough to incite violence or to kill—it's difficult if not impossible for us to visualize the kind of peace that Paul was describing and hoping for. However, it's not as if the world that Paul lived in was any less divided. He was facing his own set of prejudices in the churches he served. Most of the churches of his day were living with the tension between Jewish and Greek and Roman members. From a Jewish perspective, all non-Jews were Gentile and heathen. From a Greek and Roman perspective, all others were uncultured and uncivilized barbarians. When a gathering included members of all these various backgrounds, it obviously created the potential for problems within the community. In fact, a careful reading of all of the Epistles that Paul wrote that form a majority of our New Testament, these letters are pastoral letters written in answer to situations which had arisen in the congregation after he left. Paul was always asked to deal with one conflict or another relating to divisions in his world that were troubling the churches. Despite this, Paul could still envision all those divided people coming together in Christ in a world of unity, wholeness and peace. The reason for that belief is rooted in his belief that Jesus' death on the cross effected reconciliation between the divided parts of the human family. He framed this from a Jewish perspective—in his mind it was the rules and regulations of the Law that separated the Jewish people and the Gentiles of his day and therefore built a dividing way of hostility between them. At least part of the outcome of Jesus' death was to cancel out the validity of the rules that divided people. That is an important consideration, because we do need to let go of our tendency to create and hold onto rules and other things that we built to establish barriers between us which prevent us from recognizing that in God's eyes we are all members of one family. But Paul's belief was also based on something a little bit deeper which made him think that the future of the human family was

one of unity. Paul also says that through Jesus' death, he "made peace" for us all. In part, it seems that Paul is referring to the idea that Jesus' death reconciled us all to God, that his obedience even unto death, was atonement for Adam's disobedience. The implication being that if we can be reconciled to God, then we should be open to reconciliation with each other. One aspect of this line of thinking has to do with the concept that the only way to overcome hatred is to absorb it by responding to it with love. That is an ancient concept: you cannot overcome hatred with hatred. You can only overcome hatred with love. You cannot overcome violence with violence. You can only overcome violence with peace. These sayings were made popular by Gandhi and Martin Luther King in recent history. Paul viewed Jesus' death as an act of love creating the possibility of peace overcoming the hatreds and divisions of the human family. He believed that the peace inaugurated by Jesus Christ could heal the divisions of the world. Today, we are left with the question of whether or not we believe that the Jesus' death brought into our world the possibility of that peace which can heal the divisions in our world. Despite Paul's proclamation of a "new humanity" united in Christ, it seems that, if anything, the conflicts of our world have proliferated. Could that be because we have not taken our role as the "body of Christ" seriously enough? As the Body of Christ, it is our task to demonstrate what that unity looks like in our life together as communities of faith. It is our job to extend the grace and mercy and love and peace of Christ to the people of our world. That may seem like a daunting task. There is so much division. It is so easy to withdraw. And in the world of covid-19 so many reason right now. We may wonder what one person can do to change all the divisiveness around us. What can our peaceful acts accomplish in the face of so much hatred and anger and violence? In spite of the size of the problem, I believe one peaceful act can transform the whole world. One act of patience, one act of kindness, one act of understanding, one peaceful act can have a ripple effect in our world...and because of the ripples set in motion the true effect may not be known. Our peaceful actions in our everyday lives may change one person's world for the better and thus contribute toward the vision of a human family living together in unity, wholeness and peace. There have been many who have believe that this vision is a possibility, who have taught those who were willing to listen for generations that it is possible for us to live a different way that the one we so often choose. When we believe that what we do can make this kind of difference, then maybe we too can visualize the peace Paul envisioned—because we will begin to see the effect on ourselves and on the people around us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.