

“Release or Rupture”
Matthew 5:9, 21-26, 43-48
Series: The Missing Peace Week 5 Loving Your Enemies
The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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We’ve been searching for the missing peace since the beginning of the New Year. We learned how to have peace with God, peace within ourselves, peace in the family, peace with coworkers, classmates, community members. Now we come to the toughest one of all: making peace with our enemies. I’ve learned so much from the peace practices during this series I decided to make peace in a high-level conflict. I offered our sanctuary and my diplomatic skills to make peace between Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. No breakthroughs yet!

Making peace is important to Jesus. In the opening to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”. Matthew 5:9

This beatitude tells us two things about peacemakers: 1) they are blessed by God which means God looks on them with favor and joy and 2) they are God’s children. This means when you make peace with someone you bear a strong family resemblance to our Heavenly Father. When you make peace God looks on you with joy and says, “That’s my girl. That’s my boy.” In addition to making your Heavenly Father happy, making peace will also bring healing to your body, mind, family and community. A lack of peace throughout 2020 caused devastation in our nation. It’s definitely worth it to make peace. So let’s make this personal.

Think of a conflict you have right now with someone. It may be small or great. It can be a family member, a friend, a neighbor, coworker, classmate or an out and out enemy. Do you have the person in mind? If the person is sitting next to you don’t look at them. Now picture this relationship like this rubber band. The farther you pull apart, the greater the tension between you. The longer the conflict, the more energy it causes you to keep it going. The wider the distance, the higher the chance you will rupture the relationship. Instead of rupture, Jesus teaches us to release the tension. He gives us specific exercises for how to make peace.

The first is **Lose the Labels**. Early in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:21-22

The starting point for peace is inside you and me. Few of us will commit murder. Yet Jesus tells us to search for the source of violence and murder. They begin inside the mind and the heart with angry, bitter, resentful feelings. All of us have these. Peace begins with honestly examining your feelings. Search your heart. Do you argue in your head against a rival? Do you imagine yourself presenting your case, justifying your thoughts and actions, and always winning the argument?

After anger, the Lord mentions two labels: “Raca” – an Aramaic word which probably means “empty headed” or idiot and “You fool” – the Greek word “mora” which is the origin of our word “moron.” Now murder is a lot worse than calling someone a moron. Yet according to Jesus the labels we stick on an adversary are crimes that can send us to court and sins that can send us to hell. That punishment seems way out of proportion...until you consider this: every war, genocide, and holocaust starts with a slur or insult. When you call someone a name, when you slap a slur on them, you take away their humanity. And if they are less than human, then it’s not a problem to hate them, harm them, harass them, hunt them down or hang them.

Labels are used even in our ordinary conflicts. “You’re lazy, stubborn, stupid, an idiot, a jerk. You always do this. You’ll never change. You’re hopeless.” Labels lump people in a prejudice. They prevent us from listening and learning what may be going on inside our opponent. They stop us from understanding. They stretch the rubber band. Think for a moment about the conflict I asked you to consider. In your thoughts do you label the person? Do you call them a name? Do you lump them into a category? “All men do this. All women are just like that. You know how teens act. Kids these days!” Now take a minute and peel off the label. Ask yourself, “Why might they have said or done what they did?” and “What does the conflict look like from their point of view?” Losing labels helps to release some of the tension.

Second, **See Your Part in the Problem.** When I stop focusing on their faults, Jesus tells me to examine my part of the rubber band.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

Worshippers bring a gift to the Temple altar to seek God’s forgiveness, to wipe away the debt of sin, to reconcile with God. Now before you get right with God, Jesus tells you to do something else. Ask: Does someone hold something against me? Do I need to seek my brother or sisters’ forgiveness? Ask yourself, “What is my part in the problem?” Making your part right is so essential, Jesus tells you to leave worship now and go seek forgiveness. (The entire church just emptied out). You can’t have a close relationship with God in heaven, if you don’t reconcile with someone on earth, if you don’t release your side of the rubber band.

Now think about that conflict in your life and ask: What is my part? You cannot control how the other person thinks or acts. You can work on your feelings. Where was I wrong? What did I do or say to add to the argument? Why did I react so strongly in this situation? How am I keeping or increasing the tension? Is there an apology I owe or an amends I can make?

Third, **What Is the Price of Peace?** There is always a cost to make peace. You may have to pay what you owe or forgive what is owed you. Perhaps you will have to admit you were wrong about something or let someone off the hook of your anger. You may need to compromise which means you won’t get everything you want. You may fear making peace will expose you to another round of arguments. It’s possible. Peacemaking always costs something.

Maybe you say, “Jesus, I’m not ready to pay that cost.” Make peace with my Ex who cheated on me? Make peace with my children who take and take from me and only give me grief

and rejection in return? Make peace with my parents who criticized, ignored, abused me? Make peace with my boss who puts me through a living hell in order to make him look good? Make peace with my teacher who punishes me for nothing, but lets the favorites get away with murder? Making peace always costs something.

Yet there is also a cost when we don't make peace. Jesus says,

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. Matthew 5:25-26

Maybe you won't wind up in a literal jail. Yet refusing to make peace may feel like a prison. The cost you pay for not making peace can be lots of legal bills, emotional exhaustion, physical sickness, hostile work environments, a ruptured relationship and a fractured family. Years ago I visited a woman in the hospital nearing her last days. Her son and daughter-in-law were members of Woodside. Due to a misunderstanding about family heirlooms, they had not spoken to her in years. So I went to the son and said, "If you want to reconcile with your mother, now is the time." He could have stood his ground and stayed away. It would cost him the chance to reconcile with his mother. Thankfully, that was a price he refused to pay. He made peace with his mother before they said goodbye. What will it cost you to make peace? What will it cost if you don't?

Finally, **Make Peace like God.**

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43-48

Why does Jesus want us to make peace with everyone, including our enemies? Because God does. Why does Jesus want us to bless those who oppose us and even persecute us? Because God does. He doesn't only send his sun and rain on the crops of the good and righteous. He also blesses the fields of the evil and unrighteous. You know that unconditional love you love to receive? He also gives it unconditionally to those who hate him. Why? For the same reason He pours His unconditional love on you. He wants to make peace with them, to help them find their way home to Him, to have them in His family.

Jesus chooses two perennial enemies of the Jewish people: tax collectors and Gentiles. Tax collectors were Jewish traitors and collaborators who worked for the Romans. And the Gentiles were outsiders and oppressors like the Romans. Jewish people in Jesus' day despised both of these groups. They labeled them as evil, unrighteous, enemies of God. Then Jesus holds up a mirror and says, "If you only love those who love you, you are just like them. If you only welcome those who welcome you, you are just like them." Your Father in heaven gives them

unconditional love. He welcomes them. He makes peace with them. So must you. Then Jesus says something which is easily misunderstood: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). In this verse the word “perfect” doesn’t mean never make a mistake. It means mature, grown up. Isn’t that what we are trying to do: to grow up more and more to be like our Heavenly Father? And what does our Heavenly Father do? He makes peace. He sent His Son Jesus to make peace. He wants His sons and daughters to make peace.

Start with the conflict I asked you to consider. Start by looking at the emotions inside you, by peeling off the labels you apply on the other person. Start by trying to understand their perspective, by seeing and releasing your part in the problem. Start by paying the cost of peace. Take the first step. Make the call. Offer an apology. Make amends. They may not respond. They may reject your offer. Or you might repair, restore and reconcile the relationship. When you make peace, you will look more and more like a child of your Heavenly Father.

And don’t stop with your current conflict. Try to widen the circle of your relationships by welcoming in those who are outsiders. Jesus was called the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He constantly loved and welcomed them in.

Early in his ministry, Leonce Crump was pastor of college ministries of a large church in Sevierville, Tennessee, the hometown of Dolly Parton. With God’s help, Leonce grew the ministry from 3 students to 200. What’s more amazing is Leonce was the only African American in an all-white college ministry. How is this possible? He worked hard to widen his circle, to include people not like him, to work for unity in Jesus’ name. Then came the time a young man utterly different than Leonce showed up. Wearing overalls and no shirt, he drove a jacked up pickup truck with gun racks in the back and two Confederate flags waving. Every week we would arrive late, leave early and sit in the back of the room, arms and legs crossed glaring at Leonce without saying a word. Week after week this happened. Finally, one day the young man waited around. When Leonce approached him, the young man said in a thick Tennessee accent,

“I got some things to say to you.” “Okay, I’m listening.” “Well,” the young man says, “I can’t call you the N word (although he didn’t say ‘The N word’ he said *the* word). I can’t call you the N word on account of what Jesus done in my heart. My granddaddy, why he says to call you colored. But I figured I’d ask you before I called you anything.” “Well man, that was a very wise idea. You can call me Leonce. You can call me Pastor or you can call me Pastor Leonce.” With that, the young man grabbed my hand and said, “Well I just want you to know pastor, that I’m on your team.” And from that day forward, that young man never left my side until I moved away. He became my most helpful ministry aide in everything that we did. My circle had expanded. I gave up a little to expand my circle and they gave up a lot. Those kids loved me and my wife and we loved those kids. We saw incredible transformation and conversion and fruit – the greatest of those was that young man who, I’m presuming based on his own words, would have gladly called me the N word weeks before. But after entering my circle, became my greatest aide and ally.