

Peace???

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 6, 2019 <> World Communion Sunday
Text: Numbers 6:22-27

I'm guessing today's text sounded familiar to you. Well, maybe not when Sandi read it in French but in English, you definitely should have recognized it. Can anybody tell me why it sounds familiar? (*pause for responses*). Yes! This IS the benediction prayer that is offered at the conclusion of worship on every Communion Sunday here in a tradition that definitely predates me. Does anyone here this morning remember when it started being used on Communion Sundays? (*pause for responses*) Well, in any event, as I have said many times before, I knew I was in the right church for me when I realized the central place this prayer has in the life of this congregation. As I have pointed out before, it is even framed and hangs over the doorway entrance to the sanctuary from the Bell Courtyard narthex. I'm guessing you seldom notice it, but it's there, sort of watching over us every time we gather in this sacred space. I certainly feel its presence every Sunday as I walk underneath it to enter the sanctuary with the Deacon and the choir each week.

“The Lord bless you and keep you,
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,

And give you peace.”

This is indeed a beautiful prayer. And I bet you were surprised to find out it was in the middle of the Book of Numbers, one of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Pentateuch. These five books form the foundation of the religion of Judaism, and by extension, Christianity and even Islam. Even more interesting is to realize that its placement in the Pentateuch means this beautiful prayer is truly ancient, almost 3000 years old. Copies of this prayer engraved on silver tablets were found in ancient tombs in Jerusalem dating back to the early 6th century BCE. Known as the “priestly blessing,” this prayer is truly at the heart of God’s relationship with God’s people. This was true for the ancient Israelites and it’s still true for us today.

Also noteworthy is the fact, clearly visible in verse 22, that the words of this beautiful prayer are God’s. According to the text, God spoke these words to Moses and asked Moses to pass them on to the Israelites through Aaron and his sons who were by then the priests of the fledgling religion. And what exactly is God saying to the people in this beautiful prayer? The words as we experience them in contemporary English lose some of their significance and power the original Hebrew holds. This prayer is in fact a description of God’s actions in human lives. This is visible in the very first words of the prayer. “The Lord bless you”

means that God offers to the people divine gifts of many kinds that will provide for the life and well-being of both individuals and the community they comprise. For the Lord “to keep you” means that you can be certain of God’s protection from all forms of evil you might encounter. The descriptor of “God’s face shining upon you” means that God is not hiding from you or ignoring you. On the contrary God is right there with you, all the time. The phrase “lift up his countenance upon you,” my favorite one in the prayer, conveys the notion that God’s full attention is focused upon you, gently guiding you forward through life to the point where you are ready to claim and receive God’s most precious gift – peace. Important to note here is that this peace God offers is not what we usually think of as peace which is the absence of war or violence. God’s peace, the peace God offers in this blessing, is so much more than that. It denotes God’s desire that each and every one of his beloved people experience wholeness and fullness of life lived each day.

This desire of God for each of us to know peace in the divine sense, this phenomenal notion of peace as encompassing a life lived with a sense of wholeness, of fulfillment, of knowing beyond any doubt that you are living the life God always intended you to live is why I chose this text for this Sunday when we observe World Communion Sunday. It also seemed especially relevant to the dedication of our Peace Pole immediately following this

service. I chose it because this beautiful prayer captures perfectly the notion of peace as God intends it, as God understands it, that is so central to the whole idea of World Communion Sunday.

I was quite surprised to learn that World Communion Sunday actually originated in my hometown – Pittsburgh, PA. It was the brainchild of the Stewardship Division or committee of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church. The pastor of that church, the Rev. Hugh Thomsen Kerr, came up with the idea in 1933 while serving as a national leader in the Presbyterian Church, but it was this local group of lay people in the church he pastored that took the idea and ran with it. The goal of World Communion Sunday was a simple one: “to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.”

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday) This very same ecumenical movement gave birth to the United Church of Christ in 1957 and the UCC quickly became one of many denominations around the world that incorporated the observation of World Communion Sunday into their liturgical calendars and practice. This recognition of the interconnectedness of Christians all around the world, as exemplified tangibly this one Sunday when the common Sacrament of Communion is observed as though the

church really was one, has at its core the recognition of the elusiveness of the peace God promised in this ancient priestly benediction from Numbers. So, if God promised peace, why then does it remain so elusive thousands of years later? Why has God not kept his promise of giving us peace? Good question.

Unfortunately, it's not the right question. God did keep God's promise because God did bless humankind with everything needed to make peace a reality. The promise-breaker here is not God, but us. We are the ones who fail to keep up our end of the bargain when it comes to peace – creating it, maintaining it, living it. And why is that? Why do we continually screw up when it comes to living into reality the peace we say we crave? ... Because peace is hard. Peace is difficult. Peace is darn near close to impossible because living peace into reality takes total commitment all the time. It takes unrelenting effort in the face of continual disappointment and a considerable amount of sacrifice.

In short, peace and what it takes to achieve and maintain it runs contrary to human nature. Peace means letting go of the need to be right, to be in charge, to be the most powerful, to be the wealthiest, to be whatever it is in the moment that requires someone else to be less than you are. Peace is messy and dangerous. Peace is digging up land mines and IED's instead of burying them. Peace is feeding people, healing people, housing people, just because they are people and not because they are

worthy of the help. Peace requires speaking the truth in love to power and paying the consequences for doing so. This is why peace is neither top down nor bottom up. Peace requires that everyone honor and respect the other regardless of all the reasons not to. Peace, dear friends, is what happens when we embody Jesus' great commandment to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as we would love ourselves. Every time we don't do that – which, let's be honest, is every day – we push peace further away. We keep peace from getting a foothold in our midst. We thwart God over and over again as God tries to give us all that we need to live into reality the peace God always intended to be our way of life.

Dear friends, it doesn't have to be that way. God has blessed us with God's love, God's guiding presence, God's safe-keeping as we work to create a peaceful world, a world where life is lived in wholeness and fulfillment. We can do this. Or, at the very least we can try. But, as we've already said – this is hard work. Easy to overlook or forget about work. When it comes to peace, it is just too easy to take that Scarlett O'Hara approach to problem solving and tell ourselves, "I'll think about that tomorrow" and tomorrow comes. This is why tangible reminders of God's promise of peace to us, and our responsibility to make that promise real are so very important. This is why our Peace Pole matters. It is our witness to ourselves, to our community, to our country, and even the

whole world that we are, as the old folk song says, ready to give peace a chance.

The message of the Peace Pole is a simple one: “May peace prevail on earth.” Those words in English, our language, appear on one of the panels of our Peace Pole. Another of the languages on the Pole is Hebrew to remind us of God’s ancient prayer for peace we remember every Communion Sunday in this church. Another language is French, representing all the other languages of the world, spoken and written. Two more languages also appear on the Pole, reminding us that not all languages are spoken aloud or written in ink on paper. Those languages are American Sign and Braille. Truly, then, we are doing our small part to carry God’s ancient promise of peace to everyone, in ways they are able to comprehend so that they too can be recipients of this ancient prayer of blessing from the living God we celebrate this day. May this simple prayer of peace we celebrate and commemorate this day continue to circle the globe, spreading as simply and profoundly as the light of God’s shining face to all who are open to receiving it. Let it be so, God. Amen.