

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 16: 18 - 20 & Amos 5:12
New Testament: Colossians 3:15

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Let's start with a friendly reminder. We are re-engaging the series we started off the calendar year with when we went bit by bit through Paul's exhortation to the Colossian community. My contention was that by following the concepts in his exhortation we, First Presbyterian Church, would be more successful in our efforts to live in rhythm with God, with one another, and with the whole Lexington community. We started by examining characteristics: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And we were to understand that we are called to wear these characteristics on our proverbial sleeves; to wear these characteristics like we wear our Husker gear. Our compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience are to be as blatantly obvious to one another and the Lexington community as is our Husker fandom and support. As Paul builds his exhortation he then makes the contention that these characteristics enable *actions* and *behaviors* culminating in a distinct way of living that sets us apart from the world around us. **These characteristics of compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience enable us to practice acceptance, forgiveness, and love which creates harmony in everything.** Harmony is a synonym for rhythm. Everything and everyone flowing forward together. Limited discord. Limited strife. Limited conflict. This sounds much better to me than what we are living through in the United States in 2024 during an election cycle.

Today we read in verse 15 that in addition to all that we just reviewed Paul tells us that it is imperative that the peace of Christ rule our hearts. The verb being used there is $\beta\rho\alpha\beta\epsilon\upsilon\acute{\epsilon}\tau\omega$ and the verb pertains to determining what the decisive factor is when we take any kind of action. It is also in the imperative tense. This is a necessity! Not merely a suggestion. "Let" is almost too weak, hence my rendering above that it is imperative that the peace of Christ be the decisive factor in everything we do. Will your, or my, action or vote or spoken word or social media post expand the peace of Christ in our community and world or detract from it? This is what Paul is asking of the Colossian church and, by extension, us. Can we get to the place where all our decisions and actions are filtered through whether or not they expand the peace of Christ in our homes, our churches, our communities, and our world?

This then begs the question, what is the peace of Christ? **The peace of Christ is a shalom orientation.** Let's start defining what a shalom orientation is by reminding

ourselves of what shalom is not; what peace is not. Shalom is not the absence of conflict. Shalom is not “peace” that is maintained through force, threat, or intimidation. Shalom is not burying your head in the sand and ignoring all the injustice around you for your own sense of calm. Shalom is not even equality. Shalom is wholeness. Completeness. Equity. At-one-ness. The Genesis narrative reveals not only that God created everything good but further that there was equity amongst all that God created. Not one thing that God created was more important than any other thing that God created but all things fit together and depended on one another; a fully functioning body. Beyond that, God was one with all that God created. God strolled amongst the garden that God had created out of an outflowing of His creative love. It is safe to imagine God stopping and smelling the roses, singing with the birds, and petting and cuddling all the cuddly woodland creatures He created. These would all be appropriate images to express God’s at-one-ness with God’s own creation. When we, being Christians, talk about restoration and reconciliation, about God seeking to restore and reconcile His own good creation to Himself, this at-one-ness is exactly what we are talking about.

But here’s the deal. This at-one-ness is not exclusively about my personal at-one-ness with God; or your personal at-one-ness with God. Referring back to the body analogy from last week’s sermon, Paul emphasized to the Corinthians that we are so intimately connected as a body, we are so whole and at one, that if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. When we speak about peace, shalom, when we speak about at-one-ness we are talking about the whole of creation! Not just our nuclear or extended families. Not just our congregations. Not just the people we like. Not just the people we associate with. But absolutely all of God’s good creation! The peace of Christ that Paul is asking us to keep as our final arbiter in deciding what we say and do is this pursuit of at-one-ness on a community, state, national, and global scale. The peace of Christ ruling our hearts means that every choice, every action is filtered through the lens of will this create more or less shalom, at-one-ness, in the world?

The prophets, Amos being chief among them, always pointed out that the reason the Hebrews were always being taken over was not because the Assyrians, or the Babylonians, or the Romans were bigger, meaner, and more powerful than they were. But that the reason the Hebrews were being taken over was their failure to pursue shalom; at-one-ness. Their failure to pursue liberty and justice for all persons. They failed in their deuterocanonical mandate to not pervert justice; to not show partiality; to not accept bribes. They failed in their duty to pursue equity. How is this applicable in our lives today? The majority of you have already been processing throughout this sermon how this pursuit of at-one-ness, the peace of Christ, needs re-engaged because we certainly are not to that point yet.

Here's the hope. This peace, this shalom, this at-one-ness belongs to the Christ; the Anointed One. And the Christ, the Anointed One is risen. Christ lives and is not dead. This means that shalom lives and is not dead, even when it feels like it. This means that we have the opportunity available to us to live into this shalom more and more every day. It cannot be defeated because it has already won. Thanks be to God. Amen.