



## Worship: Peace

### Ephesians 2:11-22

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This summer we are talking about worship. Over the past year, we've had to rethink our corporate worship – how we worship, where we worship, what really makes worship ... well, worship. Some of us have joined in worship while in our pjs on the couch. Others have worshipped while eating breakfast at the table. Some have worshipped with more than one online congregation. Others have joined in worship at others times, even later in the week, because Sunday morning has been dedicated to running errands when the stores are most deserted. And now, a first in my time at Washington Street, I'm worshipping with a large screen in the sanctuary.

Worship can happen at any time, in any place, in a variety of formats. But regardless of when, where, or how we worship, there are components that are found just about every time we worship. We're looking at the letter to the Ephesians to help us identify some of these core tenants of worship.

Last week, we began by naming that worship is about offering praise – giving thanks to the one who created, called, and gifted us. Today, we consider how worship is about proclaiming *peace*.

Our text this morning says that Christ *is our peace*; and that he has created a new humanity, thus making peace. It goes on to say that Christ came and proclaimed peace to both those who were far and those who are near. Before we dive into this text too deep, I want to consider this word *peace*.

Peace goes by many names. I'm curious, what do you think of when you hear the word peace? Share in the chat – what imagery, vision, or synonyms pop in your head as you reflect on this word, *peace*?

Perhaps you think about serenity? Wholeness? Contentment? Calmness? Respite? Or harmony? ... Maybe it's a quiet house, or an ocean breeze, or a good book, or perhaps a family dinner ... ok, maybe not a family dinner.

There are many different ways to think about peace, and the word has carried different connotations throughout the history of humanity. In the late first century, when this text was first written, peace was a fairly well-known word. In the Jewish world, one couldn't use the word peace without reflecting back on the voice of the prophet Jeremiah, who invited God's people to "Seek the welfare of the city." The welfare – the *peace* – the *shalom*. Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, is found in the Hebrew Scriptures over 200 times. In the minds-eye of the people Israel, shalom was a common thought and visionary goal for God's created humanity.

But this letter isn't being written to Jews. The letter to the Ephesians is not written to Jewish converts of Christianity; instead, this letter is being written to a Gentile community. Gentiles were any who were

*not* Jewish – those outside of the people Israel. Coming from a Jewish author, it was very much a binary world: Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles, though they knew *of* Judaism, did not know the Hebrew Scriptures. They did not follow the Jewish law. For them, peace was not connected to the Biblical understanding of shalom.

It is more likely that when the Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world heard the word *peace*, they would have thought of the Pax Romana. *Pax Romana* is Latin for “Roman Peace.”

There are varying dates attributed to the Pax Romana, but we know based on historical writings that by the time the letter to the Ephesians was first written, close to 70 AD, the Pax Romana was already being discussed as the great age of the Roman empire. Wikipedia defines it this way, “The *Pax Romana* is a roughly 200-year-long timespan of Roman History which is identified as a period and golden age of increased as well as sustained Roman imperialism, order, prosperous stability, hegemonial power and expansion.”<sup>1</sup>

Roman Peace was defined in quite a different way than the Jewish understanding of shalom. Peace, according to the Pax Romana, was not about the absence of conflict or war, but was instead about Rome exerting enough power over their surrounding neighbors that others had lost the ability to resist Rome’s imperialistic and devastating expansion.

Just as the Jewish world revolved around the binary of Jews and Gentiles, so too the Roman world revolved around the binary of Romans and everyone else. You were either for Rome, or you were against it; and if you were against it, well then, you were a disruption to the so-called *peace*. This was the argument that was used against Jesus before Pilate and Herod. Jesus was bad for Rome because his teaching and ministry encouraged the disrupting of the so-called Pax Romana – a peace hailed by Caesar.

Having considered the understanding of the word *peace*, let’s now look back to our text in Ephesians. Hearing this text as a Gentile in 70 AD living in the midst of the Pax Romans makes a pretty big difference in the way this text might be received.

As verse 11 begins, the author is going to make clear the binary distinction that was something of an elephant in the room. Again, this is being written to Gentiles. The text begins, “Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time without Christ.”

It’s an odd opening, but this first verse offers a statement of confession. This letter is being written by either Paul or a close confidant of Paul, and it names that the Jews have a derogatory way of referring to the Gentiles. You, who are called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision.” It’s such insider language, and it shows just how great the divide is between these two communities of people. And that the author, being Jewish himself, is the one to name this insider language ... well, it’s just a fascinating start to what’s coming next.

The author goes on, saying, “You Gentiles were without Christ – you were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” He’s not using the kindest of language. He’s just affirming how great was the divide between the Jews and the Gentiles. There’s a great chasm between the two; there is and has been great enmity between the Jews and Gentiles.

In naming this divide, the author not only calls the Gentiles aliens and strangers, but he declares they have not hope without God in this world. To be quite clear, “The Gentiles were hardly atheists, but they did not know the God of Israel, the God of promise; they were “without God” not matter how many gods they may have worshipped.”<sup>ii</sup>

The author is not making the most flattering of invitations for the Gentiles to receive the promise that comes next. Setting up the promise of God’s peace in this way is akin to naming all of someone’s faults, everything you hate about the other, before inviting them to know they are loved. I thought about a number of contemporary examples I could offer to further make this point, but I couldn’t think of any I could say out loud without offending someone – whether an individual or a group of people. So I’ll leave it to your imagination to consider the ways this kind of setup happens in our world today.

For as alienating as this invitation may begin, in naming the reality of the great chasm between the two, the author is setting up just how glorious God’s presence really is in Christ, which removes the enmity that exists in this binary world of Jews and Gentiles.

After naming the great divide between the two communities, the author shifts to God’s act of reconciliation in Christ. Beginning in verse 13 we read, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.”

The work of God in Christ hasn’t just welcomed the Gentiles into the community of faith, into the body of the covenanted people. The work of God in Christ has made something new – it has formed a new community in which Jew and Gentile are not distinguished from one another.

How can this be? How has this divide have been broken down? Verse 15 picks back up, “Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace.”

The use of the law is referenced in verse 11 as it talks about circumcision – a requirement of the Jewish law. It was the tenants of the law that had historically separated the two groups. “The result of destroying the law is not to bring the Gentiles into the Jewish nation, but to create a new reality in which both Jew and Gentile participate.”<sup>iii</sup> The Gentiles will not be forced to conform to Judaism – nor will the Jews be forced to give up their Judaism. Instead, what is formed is a new community, a new entity in which the Jew and Gentile are now as one, both bringing their full selves into relationship with one another. This new creation, though intended to encompass all of humanity, is exemplified in the church.

The author continues, saying, “Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”

Christ has proclaimed a peace to all – those far off and those near – and we are brought into one new creation – one new community – through the Spirit who connects us to God. New Testament scholar Ralph Martin names that in Pauline theology, the idea of peace carries two components. First, peace brings about reconciliation to God, forming a new relationship with God known as peace.<sup>iv</sup> We hear this in Paul’s letter to the Romans, as he writes, “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Secondly, as this paragraph in Ephesians demonstrates, peace for Paul is about the reconciliation that unites people across cultural and religious divides.

Christ, as our peace, unites us with God and unites us with one another – and this unity comes through the breaking down of that which divides us. With God, it is sin that is forgiven to reconnect us with the divine. And with one another, it is our enmity and animosity toward the other which, when broken down, unites us with each other.

This is the power of the peace the author speaks of. It is a power that has already broken down the barrier walls that divide us from God and from one another.

You’ll recognize that in worship, peace is a weekly focus. Every week, we are invited to extend the “peace of Christ” with one another. We often do this at the start of worship as way of welcoming each other into the worship space. However, more liturgically appropriate, the passing of the peace comes after the prayer of confession and assurance of pardon.

When we say to another, “the peace of Christ be with you,” we are not simply saying, “hello.” We aren’t just acknowledging the presence of one another. We aren’t even offering a platitude akin to, “I hope you have a great day.”

No, when we say to one another, “the peace of Christ be with you,” we are offering the full invitation of this text in Ephesians. We are saying that no matter how divided we may be, no matter how different we may be, no matter the disparity in how the culture around us might define you and I, that in this space, in this moment, in this exchange of peace, you and I are as one, because God through Christ has made us one.

And, appropriately following the confession and pardon, we acknowledge in the sharing of peace that we are not only reconciled and united with one another, but that we are also reconciled and united with God. In that moment, in the promise of peace to one another, we are proclaiming the very power of God to make all things right.

And the sharing of the peace is not a one way ticket – it’s a responsive invitation. I say to you, “the peace of Christ be with you” – because I acknowledge how Christ has created a new humanity in which you and I are reconciled as one. And you, in response, say, “and also with you,” because you acknowledge that in Christ, a new humanity has been created, in which you and I are reconciled as one.

Our society continues to try to find ways to put us at odds against each other, as if binaries are the way of God. As if we stand opposed to one another as Christian and non-Christian, black and white, American and immigrant, male and female, old and young, rich and poor, urban and rural, conservative and progressive, mainline and evangelical ... how many ways does the world try to divide us. But this is not the invitation of God in Christ. In Christ, these walls are broken down, and we are made as one.

In the Presbyterian – PC(USA) – Book of Order, the church is defined as, “a provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.” The church is called to be a demonstration for “the new humanity brought about by God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ.”<sup>v</sup> I can’t think of any moment in the life of the church that reflects this better than in the sharing of the peace of Christ – a proclamation that the divisions of the world are brought to an end, the dividing walls that keep us on the left or the right are broken down, and in the love of God we are united in the formation of a new creation – a new humanity – a new promise where humanity stands together, in a shared identity. This, this is the peace of Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> *Pax Romana*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax\\_Romana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana). Retrieved July 14, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen Verhey & Joseph S. Harvard. *Ephesians: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Achtemeier. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2009.

<sup>iv</sup> Ralph P. Martin. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. . Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.

<sup>v</sup> Verhey.