

Making Peace with God

Matthew 5:9

Rev. Dan Schumacher

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

When my brothers and I were children and we got into an argument or fight that we couldn't resolve on our own, my mom would get involved.

The script was predictable. One of us would say or do something to offend the other. The other would retaliate. Then the fight would escalate and at some point mom would say, "Now boys! That's enough. Get over here."

One of us would try to justify our actions: "But he said... but he did..." The other would jump in: "He did it first... It's not fair..."

And mom would say, "I don't care who started it. It ends now. What's done is done. We're starting over right now."

Then she'd say, "Now face each other." We hated this part.

"I said face each other." We'd slowly turn toward one another so we were facing one another. We knew what was coming next...

"Look at each other." We couldn't do it, because if we looked each other in the eye we'd start laughing. It's easier to stay mad at someone if you avoid eye contact.

"I said look at each other." Again, we'd relent. We made eye contact, and felt so silly looking into each others' eyes that we'd start smirking and giggling under our breath.

"Now apologize to each other."

...Silence...

"We are not leaving this spot until you both apologize to each other."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry for what?" Mom would say. "Be specific."

"I'm sorry for yelling at you... aaannnd calling you an idiot."

"Good," mom said.

"I'm sorry for stomping on your Lego car and breaking it."

“Ok,” mom would say. “Good... now hug each other.”

“What?! Mom, c’mon! We apologized. Just let us go. We won’t fight anymore. We promise!”

“You’re going to hug each other.”

You know, there is nothing so awkward as a forced hug. When it’s organic, a hug happens naturally, without any thought. You don’t have to think about what you’re doing. It just sort of happens. But when it’s required? It’s like I lose all sense of motor control. Suddenly I can’t remember how to hold my arms or which side of their body my head should go on, and I suddenly look a I’m trying to do “the robot.”

But mom insisted, because hugging was more than a sign of affection in our home. Hugging was a discipline. It was something we did when we were happy with each other and, even more importantly, it was something we did when *weren’t* happy with each other.

When I was a kid, I hated it when mom got involved. But looking back I now realize that mom was teaching us how to be peacemakers — well, at least within the small circle of our own family. It would be strange and, I assume, illegal if Katie and I got into an argument and I said, “You can’t leave my office until we hug.”

But in our family, mom wanted us to understand that fights didn’t have to result in the end of a relationship. Yes, disagreements would happen, but we could resolve them with one another. We could make peace.

Blessed are the peacemakers, says Jesus, for they will be called children of God.

The truth is *peacemaking* is hard. It can feel awkward. It can be painful. That’s because it often requires us to take a good, long look in the mirror and come to terms with our own failures. The reality is that anytime we have to work toward *making* peace it most likely means that we have also played a part in *breaking* peace.

Do you remember the story of David deciding one day that he would build a temple for God? David, the warrior-king, had been victorious against every enemy that he had pursued and every enemy that dared come against him. He’d united the twelve tribes into one kingdom. He’d even brought the ark of the covenant into the city of Jerusalem. It was a sign that the people of God would no longer wander in wilderness. The ark would be stationary, because they now had a *home*.

David was building himself a big, beautiful *home* — a palace, in fact — when it occurred to him that maybe God ought to have a *home*, too. But God wouldn’t allow David to build the temple. Instead, God told David that he had too much blood on his hands to build the LORD’s house. David’s son, Solomon, would build it instead.

Solomon was known as a man of peace. In fact, his name is derived from the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. As a king, he brought peace over the kingdom. He also built the temple and enacted peace between God and Israel. So, when Jesus is called the Son of David, this could suggest that he's like David's son, Solomon — the man of *shalom* (Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes through the Ages*, 235).

The Hebrew understanding of peace is multifaceted. Too often we think of peace simply as the absence of conflict or the end of war — and certainly those carry with them some part of the understanding of peace.

But *shalom* is more than the absence of conflict. It also connotes the presence of goodwill, of wholeness, of right relationships, of harmony and well-being.

So to be a peacemaker isn't just to seek the mere absence of conflict, but to be one who seeks the well-being of others. Stephen Shoemaker says it like this: "We are called to be *peacemakers* and not merely *peacekeepers*."

Peacekeepers are often those who prefer the absence of conflict over all else. Peacekeepers don't like to stir up the hornets nest, even if that's the only way to get rid of the hornets. But peacemakers seek the well-being of others. They are willing to get stung for the sake of others if it means dealing with those hornets.

And that is the model Jesus gave us, isn't it? What is the cross if not Jesus' willingness to be stung on our behalf?

Jesus was not merely a *peacekeeper*. He was a *peacemaker*.

And should we be surprised by that? The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Clarence Jordan said it like this: "It is the Father's nature to make peace. [God] is called the God of peace. God's Son was called the Prince of Peace. Paul says, 'He *is* our peace' (Col. 1:20). The consuming desire of God seems to have been voiced by the angels at the birth of his Son: 'Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, *peace!*'" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 20).

God the Father is a peacemaker, too. Isn't it only natural, then, that little peacemakers will be called children of God?

Unfortunately for some, God's peace seems... well, *elusive*. No matter how hard they pray or how many Bible studies they attend or how disciplined they are in their quest time or how often they go to worship, their lives are afflicted with an absence of peace.

Mental illness. Addiction. A history of abuse. PTSD. Depression. Paralyzing anxiety. Chronic pain. The tubes and pokes and prods of terminal illness. Not feeling accepted for who we are. For some of us who face such realities "peace" might as well be a foreign word.

So what hope is there for us in such moments?

The first, I think, is this: I believe that those who will be called children of God “are not necessarily those who have found peace in its fullness, but the ones who, just for that reason, try to bring it about wherever and however they can” (Frederick Buechner, “Beatitudes,” www.frederickbuechner.com).

My favorite moment in the Tom Hank’s movie about Mr. Rogers happens when the main character — a journalist — is watching from a distance as Mr. Rogers greets fans in line. The journalist turns to the woman standing next to him and introduces himself. He discovers that she is Mrs. Rogers. “So,” he asks, “how does it feel to be married to a living saint?”

Mrs. Rogers winces. “Yeah, I don’t much like that word. It suggests that his way of being (*pointing to her husband*) is unattainable. He’s not a perfect person. He gets angry. He’s learned how to deal with it.” She now looks at the journalist. “He works at it. It’s a practice.”

Not one of us — not even Mr. Rogers — is there yet. But like him, we have to work at peacemaking to get better at it. We have to practice.

The second reason I have hope is this: God’s peace will always be bigger than what we little peacemakers can achieve. Compared to God, our efforts are like trying to make two children face each other, apologize, and “hug it out.” But there is nothing in God’s economy that God can’t use for peace.

I have shared Father Gregory stories with you before. He is the Catholic Priest and founder of Homeboy Ministries out in L.A. I like to tell you stories from his ministry with gang members not because I think you’ll be able to relate in a one-to-one way with the lives of homies, but because I think sometimes if we see God at work in the most unlikely of people, it might just open our eyes to how God is at work in us, too.

He tells this story:

“Moises comes in [to my office to get a start date for a job at Homeboy Ministries] and this is the first time I’m meeting him. A lone tattoo straddles his neck and he’s like a fullback — he doesn’t have much of a neck to begin with.

‘They told me to check with you about a start date.’ I can’t tell the tonal temperature of this statement. I ask a few questions and tell him I’ll check with the council about bringing him in.

‘So you’re a father,’ he says, then half turns in his chair to point at everyone in the reception area, ‘and these are your children.’

Before I formulate whatever I am to say next, he cuts me off. 'Now I will tell you why I came into your office.' He looks to the floor, and I wait for him. 'Can... I... be your son?'

His stalky body leans forward and he grips his face with his hands. I sense the crying may take some time. But before too long, I, too, lean forward and whisper, 'Imagine. What a gift it would be to have a son like you.'

The crying accelerates and I let him be. Finally, he looks at me and I hand him several Kleenex. 'The one thing... the one thing,' he says, 'That is the one thing I only ever wanted to hear from my own father.'"

Father Gregory says, "I gave him a start date" (*The Whole Language*, chapter 3).

And so it is with us.

Peace begins when in spite of all the pain, all the disappointment, all the hurt, all the loss that has plagued our lives, God leans in and we hear him say, "Imagine. What a gift it would be to have a child like you."

And once we have heard that, well we can't help but want to be a peacemaker like our Father.

And in that moment, God gives us a start date.

Amen.