

“No God. No Peace...Know God. Know Peace”

April 29, 2018
Philippians 4:10-14 CEV

Guest speaker: Tom Burton
Wall Street United Church

I would like to start off with one of those “and the moral of the story is” stories. During the French Revolution, the aristocracy was rounded up, and most got a one-way trip to the guillotine. One Count was particularly important — he knew where the King had hidden the treasury. But the Count refused to tell where it was. Even the threat of losing his head could not persuade him to submit to the will of the people. All he would say, very emphatically, was “No, I refuse”.

Exasperated, they sent him off to die. After he was securely tied down, the official again asked him to give up the information. By this time the Count knew they meant business, and as the executioner was given the command ‘ready’, the Count began to shout ‘NO’!! Thinking the Count was again going to refuse, the official gave the signal, the blade came down and off rolled his head. Unfortunately, the Count was actually trying to shout “No, stop, I’ll tell where it is!” So — what’s the moral of the story? *Don’t hatchet your counts before they chicken!*

Today’s message is more of a testimonial rather than a scripture-based lesson. The message title you see on the screen “No God, No Peace...Know God, Know Peace” comes from a patch on my motorcycle riding vest. It’s a statement of my life and faith journey. But more importantly, it is a testament to the enduring and unwavering love of God.

God gave us, the human race, free will — the freedom of choice in all of our life situations. Sometimes I wish He wasn’t so trusting. I, and no doubt many others, haven’t been exactly as wise with the privilege as our Father would like. The problem with choices is they are usually stark opposites — black and white, right or wrong.

I became a prisoner of my own willfulness at the age of 14. I rebelled against everything. I was in grade nine attending a parochial school when I rebelled against my denomination, and in my mind, its suffocating rules. I refused to attend any further worship, proclaiming I should only go to church if I wished, not because I had to.

My abandoning a relationship with God was collateral damage, because I also damaged any relationship with the rest of the world. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that I discovered alcohol during that rebellion, seizing upon it as a cure for what ailed in my life. For decades I abused it liberally, and used it as an excuse for less than Christian behaviours. I

never seemed to be satisfied with anything. My spirit was so restless that I could find no peace with the world or myself. Serenity was just a word in the dictionary; Joy the name of a girl. I alienated myself from long-term friends, my extended family and my parents and siblings. I seemed to strive for goals and then self-sabotage them. Knowing full well my thoughts and behaviours; I began to loathe myself.

I just couldn't put my finger on what was missing. What did I lack, what did I need to gain some serenity and peace? And I was alone; in my mind, in my heart, in my life. Funny — I had always wanted people to leave me alone, and when they finally did it just saddened me the more. The farther and longer away from God I got, the more dysfunctional my spirit and life became. I abandoned hope and peace for chaos. All I prayed for was death. I hated life and I hated myself. I resented God for keeping me alive. And I also had an enormous fear of God and his justified but frightful punishment. (I used to jokingly say that I became a firefighter so I could get used to the temperature of my hereafter!)

So, the message title begs the question, how do you get to know God? I don't think the process is much different than getting to know someone here on earth. First off, there must be a level of attraction, and it's impossible to be attracted when you have an overriding sense of fear and dread. My fears had to be put aside. That's easier said than done, and it took me years of recovery to start believing what people were telling me — that God loved me unconditionally, just the way I am, but he loved me too much to leave me like that.

I recall the last day that I drank. I had awoken in such a horrid state that all I could do was mutter "God, I don't want to wake up like this anymore". That was a flat statement, not intended as an impassioned plea to God. In time I came to understand that the Holy Spirit carried my mutterings to God. God heard something in that statement: my surrender and a yearning for a better life. In my humble opinion, one of God's greatest miracles was taking away my compulsion to drink. Hanging out with others who already knew God also helped immensely. Their stories of their journeys convinced me that I too could be forgiven my transgression if I truly was willing to cease those behaviours and ask His forgiveness.

I also began to read about Him and his many and miraculous gifts. I sometimes lightly refer to the BIBLE as an acronym: 'Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth'. Within that lightness there also peels a great deal of truth. Good communications are essential to any lasting relationship; deeply, honestly and without reservation. So I learned to talk with God. Sometimes I just talked about what was on my mind, sometimes I tried a

more formal prayer style. I found it helpful to pray with like-minded people, to join in communal prayers.

Now I talk with God all the time; in my workshop, as I'm driving the car, while sitting quietly reflecting on life, and while riding around on my motorcycle. It's also helpful in developing the relationship to go to the places where He hangs out. So I started attending worship services here at Wall Street. That didn't happen overnight. It took me almost six years to find my way, to find the courage, to walk through the doors of this church. It was like a home coming after a long, long absence.

I liken it to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The message that Sunday morning was about God's earnest desire to forgive those who wandered from His path. I felt like it had been written and delivered just for me. My heart opened to Christ, and I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. I walked out that day feeling more hopeful than a kid digging for pirate treasure. God has put so many of his angels and agents in my path that the way was made easy. They showed me where the path was, and when I stumbled, ready and willing hands steadied me. Along the way, I accepted that God could love me. There is a sign on the wall downstairs in Serenity Hall. It states "You are not alone"- meaning that you are among like-sufferers. But I had an epiphany about a hidden meaning. *I had never been alone.* God had walked beside me all the way, saving me from myself, keeping me alive so that I could experience His love and rewards in full.

I also think it is important to share the joy of my relationship. Wherever and whenever I can, I tell people about my wondrous and loving God and the joys of getting to know Him. I offer to introduce them to Him, so that they may also enjoy His company and comfort. I have reached the stage in my relationship that I can say 'I love you' without any expectations. Today, I am certain that I am a child of God. I no longer walk in the valley of death and fear, but seek the high road to salvation. My inner child no longer cries himself to sleep.

Today, I love the God of my understanding as much as life itself.

I recently read this: "*Fear knocked on the door; faith answered; no one was there.*" How true! Faith in God will dispel all fears. That article went on to say that to fear God is to be afraid of joy. Peace and joy are inseparable by-products of each other. There is a good life to be had, filled with hope and a strong measure of peace. All of this is ours to receive, rooted in the love and benevolence of our God.

One definition of courage is the willingness to do the right thing in spite of fear. It is right to love our God with our whole being. It is right to accept God's unconditional love. I'm glad God did not hatchet me. And I'm

glad He wasn't asking me to chicken. All he wanted was for me to hear his will and surrender to his loving care. It's good to be home. Amen.