

Peace, Community Outreach and One Great Swim

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Matthew 5:1-15, NRSV

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

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

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

We had a wonderful service and baptism at the park last Sunday evening. At the service I shared about something that clicked when I did my big swim. A week ago Saturday I did this amazing swim in the river from Mallorytown Landing to Brown's Bay, about 5.5kms. It was awesome and mystical — and incredibly boring! There was lots of time to think. I spent time praying, I spent time hearing my coach say “Don't shorten your stroke!” I also thought of Wendy Trutnau, who also adores swimming and who frequently tells her family “If I die swimming, you'll know I died happy!” So that went through my mind. Happily, no happy death resulted from the swim.

I also was thinking about something that Taylor Mawson had said on Facebook. We've been praying for Taylor for a very long time because this young woman had a major snowmobile accident last winter. It was a miracle that she survived. Her journey to

health and recovery has been long. She posted a reflection on her birthday, and this is a small part of what she said. (shared with permission): *“If I could try and pull out something I had to learn in particular to share, I would say 1) surrender and 2) the importance of putting one foot in front of the other regardless of how you feel. To me that means when you don't feel like going forward or trying, you do it anyways. When you don't know if it's going to be worth it, you do it anyways.”*

It struck me because she said: “Surrender! Picture the white flag. Surrender, give up. Let go. Accept.” And then she said: “Keep fighting!” At least that’s what I heard. “Don’t let go! Don’t give up! Keep moving forward no matter what!”

It just doesn’t make sense. How can you surrender and keep fighting at the same time? We hate surrender. Surrender feels like death. Surrender means giving up control, and we hate giving up control.

On the other hand, we often don’t want to fight or keep going. The path ahead just looks too difficult. Impossible, overwhelming. *I just can’t.*

Yesterday was International Peace Day. Which feels, I don’t know ... pretty meaningless. The war in Ukraine continues with no end in sight. The Middle East is going from devastating to horrifying.

The pager and walkie talkie attacks in Lebanon is a terrifying development in war in general. We are so reliant on technology around the world.

The International Humanitarian Law based on the Geneva Convention sets out rules which aim to reduce the brutality of war: things like not targeting civilians, allowing food and medical aid to get through. South Africa and other countries are arguing that the state of Israel is violating those rules in Gaza and to an extent in the West Bank. 196 countries have signed on to these rules.

The Old Testament had rules for war for the same purpose. *‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’* was a rule to contain war and to keep it fair. Moses and the writers of the Law knew that our natural response when someone steals our cow is to burn down their entire barn and destroy all their livestock. Certainly, if it is justified for Israel to defend itself and respond to the horrific attack from October 7th last year that killed 1,139 people, we can see that it has not been a fair response. Over 42,000 Palestinians have been killed and many, many of them were children and civilians, aid workers, journalists.

I saw a post on Facebook about the pager-walkie talkie attack that said “Hopefully, this operation gives Hezbollah, and their Iranian backers pause and we can avoid a repeat of the 2006 Lebanon War.” But this attack isn’t going to give them pause. It will do the exact opposite! It will cause a response and an escalation. Because *that is our sad human nature.* As a meme on social media said: *What we have learned from history is that we learn nothing from history.*

Enter Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes.

Jesus said “*Blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek;... blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you.*” None of those things feels very blessed, or even smart. The beatitudes don’t make much sense on the surface.

It’s not that Jesus lived in a floaty, peace-love and eternal grooviness bubble. He lived at a time when peace looked like the Romans occupying their country. They even called this occupation ‘peace’ — the Pax Romana. The Peace of Rome. The peace looked like Rome exercising control. It looked like constant military presence; it looked like having to work much harder to pay tax to this government they didn’t want. It looked like doing *what* they told you — carry the soldier’s pack a mile— *when* they told you. It looked like allegiance to Caesar as Lord. It looked like any disturbance or rebellion, or perceived disturbance and rebellion being quickly squashed. It looked like zealots or other leaders being arrested and perhaps crucified. That’s what peace looked like in Jesus’ time.

That’s how every empire thinks it will bring peace today. If they have enough power, and enough military might there will be peace. Or at least there will be no disturbances and those with the right citizenship will prosper.

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On October 6th we will share our new Strategic Plan for the church. Two weeks ago we looked at the theme “Spiritual Vibrancy” which has been named as the primary purpose of Wall Street United Church. This week I want to tell you about another: *Community Outreach*.

Our objective for **Community Outreach** is to:

Strengthen the church’s role as a centre for community, engaged in making Brockville and the wider world better for everyone with a congregation deeply invested in making a difference beyond the walls.

“Beyond the Walls” is a high value at our church. We don’t exist for ourselves. We exist to bring the transforming love of Jesus to the world.

We do that in part by opening our doors and letting community groups use and rent our space. Whether we are talking about groups like Recovery Groups, or the CNIB or the Brockville 50+ or Shout Sister Choirs, we make Brockville better simply by providing space. Sometimes people get grumpy that churches do not pay property tax. But I tell you I often think of what might be lost in our community if the churches closed their doors.

Looking ‘Beyond the Walls’ is partly seeing this church as a place for the community to gather. The other part is how we follow Jesus in seeking justice, in feeding the hungry and setting the captives free.

Our motto is “God Loves ALL. So do we!” And it’s a wonderful tag line! The only problem is that we have a tendency to think it means that since God loves all, we have to *do* it all. And do we ever try! I was reading the Outreach and Social Action committee minutes and holy moly, do we ever do a lot! We are aware that while God continues to love all, we will be more effective if we focus our efforts around particular causes to which we are uniquely called and where we believe we can make a real difference.

With this particular objective, the work we need to do in the coming year and years is to discern what in particular this church is called to lift up, and help with. Like people, congregations are called to particular issues or situations. Our hope is to name 3 causes that we are especially aligned with — causes where we might partner with outside organizations who are also doing this work and invest in making a difference in this way.

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Back to sermon 2, which we’ll call *War and Peace*.

Jesus, a Jewish man, followed the law of Moses, but he took it to a radical next level. Instead of justice and peace emerging from control or from a mutual agreement on what is fair in disputes and in war, Jesus tells us justice and peace comes from a totally different place.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says “***You have heard it said ‘an eye for an eye’ but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;... and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.***”

So, not revenge. (Which believe me, if you’ve been injured, is so hard not to seek). Not even an equalizing of the hurt for hurt. No! He says ‘do not resist’. Why?

Because Jesus knows that true peace and true justice come not from outside rules, not from outside control of forces, no matter how benevolent they may or may not be. True peace comes from deep within each one of us. It comes from that place where we are connected to the One who created us. It comes from being connected to the knowledge (not head knowledge but heart and gut knowledge) that we are created in the image of God. That God created us and loves us. *And* that God loves the Roman soldier. God loves the Israeli soldier, the Hamas or Hezbollah militant who has been taught to fear those people, those terrorists. God loves the other.

God loves you just the way you are, but God also created you to grow, to be transformed into a person who sees you the way God sees you. And who sees your enemy the way God sees your enemy. Jesus’ way was peace. Not a peace that comes from outside control, but a peace that comes from a radically different place that is difficult to articulate or understand. Gandhi understood it. Dr. King understood it. Archbishop Desmond Tutu understood it. Jesus walked that peace all the way to not resisting his own execution on a cross.

Jesus and the movement that became Christianity should have died when Jesus died. Or at least it should have died shortly after with that small and unlikely group of followers who were increasingly persecuted for calling Jesus 'Lord' instead of Caesar.

But those early followers got it. They understood that there was a power that was so much deeper and more transforming than a power that comes with control from outside. They understood that true justice comes through a relationship with the God of love. They began doing strange things, like caring for widows and orphans and saying that Jews and Gentiles were equal, slaves and free were equal, women and men were equal.

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Back to sermon 1, which we'll call "Just Keep Swimming"

The swim I did last weekend was an incredible experience. I've never done anything like it. I had done some triathlons a decade ago, but in those cases you swim around a triangle of buoys. This was a small group swimming in this wide open part of the river in the early morning in one long direction.

We were fortunate because the day was beautiful, the river was calm and we were in an area – a bay—with very little current.

Last Saturday was mystical and wonderful, and I didn't want it to end! Of, course I'm human so I started getting tired. I stopped three times to drink, but I was getting hungry and my muscles were feeling it. At one point after the half-way mark of Chimney Island I all of a sudden felt like I had a new wind, but I realized the new wind wasn't coming from me. It was coming because *I found a current*. Every stroke I made moved me further than I could ever move on my own.

Friends, this is what happens when we step into the waters of God's love! To do it, we have to surrender and trust that the water will bear us up. We trust that there are people on the journey who are there for us – kayaks on the water for me and people on the shore cheering us on. We are not alone, even when the river feels too wide and too deep.

Wall Street, we are a small group of the people of God, but we are swimming in a powerful river of God's love. There are times when it will feel impossible. Don't focus on the impossible! Focus on what you are called to today! Every once in a while, as we feed people week after week or cry out "this isn't the way things should be" and we find ourselves weary, we will notice a current carrying us along and making each stroke we make go further. So many of you have felt it ... small actions being magnified in unexpected ways. Ours is a mustard seed faith. There's no real understanding it. There is just experiencing a love that is so great it is worth never giving up. Thanks be to God! Amen.

