

Seeking God's Kingdom Brings Peace: Transformation for the Hypocrite and Gentile

[SLIDE 1] Today we begin to wrap up our worship series on "Seeking Peace Together" with a final reflection on how we are called to seek peace with God. Next week Cedric Martin from Theatre of the Beat will be here to bring this series to a more definitive end when he talks about how "Peacemakers Act Creatively to Prevent Conflict." While that topic has a bit more to do with how we seek "peace with others," a section of our worship series that we ended a few weeks back, the worship committee really wanted Cedric to speak to us on this topic, so we decided that it would be ok to mess with the series order a bit and loop back to that topic at the end. Today, however, we are being called to reflect on how seeking God's kingdom brings peace.

A few weeks back, Ralph Weber approached me following the worship service to say that he was struck particularly by a word that I used that day in my sermon, and that word was [SLIDE 2] "hiding." In context, I had used that word in the following sentence: [SLIDE 3] "God identifies our hiding places so that God can be there with us and make for us a hiding place in God, a place of peace where we can face up to what we are hiding from in the presence of love." If I recall our conversation correctly, Ralph noted that while I seemed to be saying something positive about finding a "hiding place in God," hiding has usually had for him a negative connotation and so it struck him and made him wonder about whether or how hiding or being hidden can sometimes be a good thing. Ralph is right that often we do speak of hiding negatively and that hiding can be a negative action in many contexts. We know we should not "hide" the truth from each other, for example. We teach this to our children early on, even if we know as adults that telling the truth can sometimes be awfully hard in certain circumstances. As a parent, I recently found myself reminding Theo that he never had to "hide" anything from me, even if someone told him he *had* to keep it a secret. This advice of mine is, of course protective, as

children are sometimes manipulated to keep “secrets” or things “hidden” from their parents that should never happen in the first place.

Ralph and I talked a bit longer around this idea of “hiding,” and I noted that my primary source for the idea of having a hiding place in God comes from the Psalms. Take for example, [SLIDE 4] Psalm 27:5: For [God] will hide me in [God’s] shelter in the day of trouble.” Here this idea of being hidden in God connects with the idea of protection and safety. We are hidden from all which assails us from without – we are given a place to retreat to, like shelter in a storm. As I began meditating on the scripture reading from Matthew 6 in preparation for today, I was struck by the presence of a word that made me recall my conversation with Ralph. It is used twice in this passage from Matthew, and that word is: [SLIDE 5] “secret.” The text says: “...pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” [SLIDE 6] Well, wouldn’t you know that the word that Matthew uses for “secret,” here, is the same Greek word used in the Greek translation of Psalm 27:5 (Septuagint) when it talks about God “hiding” the psalmist in God’s shelter. The root word is *krupto*, and it is the linguistic origin for words like: “crypt” (as in a hidden, or secret underground lair) and “encryption” (as in the process of encoding or hiding information, making it secret). We could thus reasonably paraphrase Matthew’s passage also in this way: [SLIDE 7]

When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is hidden; and your Father who sees you in that hidden place will reward you.

Incidentally, the parable of the yeast that I spoke about with the children this morning also uses the same word when describing the action of the woman making the bread. It says: [SLIDE 8]

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and *hid* [not mixed, as some translations have it, but hid] in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

There is a learning here to be discovered about the hiddenness of the kingdom of God and how it relates to praying in secret or in a hidden place – at least that is what I thought as I journeyed on

to write this sermon in light of my conversation with Ralph a few weeks back and in light of our text for today. “How,” I found myself wondering, “might meeting God in ‘secret’ or in a ‘hiding place,’ be a way to seek God’s kingdom and bring us peace. Often, we think about seeking God’s kingdom as involving the visible, external actions of pursuing justice and peace in the world, and surely this is the case. But what might it mean to seek God’s kingdom in the secret place of prayer, in hiddenness? I’ll start by telling you what I think the answer to this question is, and then I’ll try to show you how I think it relates to our Matthew text for today. [SLIDE 9] I think **seeking God’s kingdom in the secret or hidden place of prayer is our way of letting God work inner transformation in us, of opening ourselves to the will of God to be done in us, of letting go of our false selves, so that we are that much more equipped to join God’s transforming work as the kingdom comes on earth as in heaven.** (Repeat) Having said this, let’s see if our passage from Matthew helps us come to this kind of answer.

One thing I noticed immediately about this passage from Matthew was the two key figures Jesus introduces, namely, the Hypocrite and the Gentile. [SLIDE 10] Jesus appeals to these two figures to set up a contrast between approaches to prayer that he has observed around him and the approach to prayer that he commends to his disciples. [SLIDE 11] The first contrast Jesus sets up is of the person praying in the Synagogues and on the street corners to “*be seen*” versus the person praying in secret. Jesus refers to this former figure as the “hypocrite,” which interestingly carries the meaning not simply of “someone who doesn’t practice what they preach,” but more so “a stage actor,” or a “pretender” – someone who, you might say, “acts out what they preach,” but does so inauthentically. The reward of the actor, their wages, is the temporary, fleeting admiration they gain from their viewers. As I thought about this figure – the hypocrite – I couldn’t help but think of the human need many of us have, a need to be praised

and recognized. Of course, on a deep level, most people want to be recognized and praised for their gifts and their contributions and that need is not inherently bad, not at all. But for some of us, the need to be praised can become a dysfunctional part of who we are and can warp our spiritual well-being and our pursuit of peace within and peace with others.

Some of you, I know, are familiar with the Enneagram, a personality tool used to identify different spiritual and psychological “types” and aid people in becoming more spiritually self-aware of the gifts and dangers of their inner self. While I’m sure many of us, regardless of our Enneagram type, could identify with the hypocrite in this passage, I wonder if the hypocrite might be especially like the type 3 person on the Enneagram, [SLIDE 12] the “achiever,” sometimes called “the performer.” One description of the 3 is that they are someone who “see love as something to be earned, so they quiet their inner convictions, valuing what others define as success and striving to do more and do it better.”¹ A description of an unhealthy 3 is put this way: [SLIDE 13]

Unhealthy threes find failure unacceptable, which renders them unable to admit mistakes and causes them to behave as though they are superior to others. Desperate for attention, these Threes may turn the deadly sin of self-deceit into the sin of intentional deceit, telling others fabricated stories about themselves and their accomplishments in order to maintain their image.²

For 3s, maintaining one’s image can be an exhausting exercise, as what is being presented to others is just a mask – the hypocrite, even the praying hypocrite, is hiding out in the open behind their prayer. To those of us that can identify with the hypocrite, I imagine Jesus responding:

[SLIDE 14]

Don’t worry about how you are being seen by others. Don’t seek the kingdom of perfect reputation and the hallowing of your own name. Go hide in God and hallow God’s name and see yourself as God sees you, as beloved. In being seen by God, you will begin to find transformation, peace within.

¹ Ian Morgan Cron, Suzanne Stabile. *Finding the Road Back to You*, 130.

² *Ibid*, 131.

The second contrast Jesus sets up is of the Gentile [SLIDE 15], the person who “heaps up empty phrases...thinking that they will be heard because of their many words,” versus the person who comes to God knowing that God “hears” our needs without a word even being spoken from our mouths. The Gentile’s approach to prayer also tempts those of us who pray – we can too often think of prayer as a linguistic formula, a special incantation that if done with just the right amount of emotion or sophistication, can twist God’s arm and give us what we need. As I think about the Enneagram again, [SLIDE 16] I wonder if these “Gentiles” that Jesus refers to here, who “heap up empty phrases,” might be akin to a type 4, the “Individualist” or the “Romantic,” as they are sometimes called. 4’s are described as emotionally expressive and creative and who have a need “to find themselves and their significance,” to be special. However, when unhealthy, [SLIDE 17] 4s tend to struggle with self-pity, seeing themselves as victims who need a “rescuer,” and who often end up pursuing fulfilment of their basic needs through manipulating others.³ Dwelling in self-pity and manipulating others to get what we need is also exhausting, as what we get through self-pity and manipulation is never enough – the Gentile, even the praying Gentile, is also hiding, this time behind their empty phrases. To those of us that can identify with the Gentile, I imagine Jesus responding: [SLIDE 18]

There is no need to manipulate God or others to get what you need. Your empty phrases won’t help. Go hide in God who wills your good. There you will find you already have what you need. In being heard by God, you will begin to find transformation, peace within.

I return now to the question I asked near the outset of this sermon: “How might meeting God in ‘secret’ or in a ‘hiding place,’ be a way to seek God’s kingdom and bring us peace?” Having looked at the characters of the Hypocrite and the Gentile, I hope that my answer to this question has made some sense. When we stay “out in the open” and avoid the hidden, secret

³ <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-4>

place of prayer with God, we are prone to try to maintain and secure the false selves that we wrongly think will bring us peace with God or with others. We are tempted to set up a kingdom of our own self-established identity that is in reality a house of cards. To get beyond that false self, we need to spend time in secret, seeking God there and finding our true selves there.

[SLIDE 19] When we do, seeking God's kingdom in the secret or hidden place of prayer can become our way of letting God work inner transformation in us, of opening ourselves to the will of God to be done in us, of letting go of our false selves, so that we are that much more equipped to join God's transforming work as the kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. [SLIDE 20] Of course, the time will always come, just as it did for Jesus throughout his ministry, for us to emerge from our hidden place of prayer, and in that time we will be asked to trust in God for our well-being, our daily bread, a time when we will be asked to forgive others as we have been forgiven, and a time when we will come up against new trials. But our time hiding in God and praying, promises to give us a heart that longs for God's kingdom, often hidden but ever so near, coming on earth as in heaven. May it be so. AMEN

Our hymn of response today is a new hymn, and we will be playing a video for it – it is based upon the Lord's prayer, with the text adapted by composers Mark Miller and Laurie Zelman. I've set the song to repeat after the first time through so hopefully the second time through you will feel comfortable to sing along.

Communion

When I think of Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his death, I like to think of it as a meal baked in prayer – prayer for the gift of food, yes, but also prayers and songs, like the one we just sang, sung in praise to God's name, prayers hallowing God's name and prayers pleading

that amidst the trials all around, that God's kingdom would come and will would be done. This meal even had a bit of a "secretive" or "hidden" quality to it, too. While Jesus had many opportunities to eat publicly with his disciples and among the crowds, now, in this last intimate meal, Jesus sets apart a room, shut the door, and shared a special time with his closest friends where they could be *seen* and *heard* by God in all their humanity. In that space Jesus saw through every one of their masks, their attempts to hide from God, and instead of demanding that they fall into line, he stooped to serve them and love them; he tended to them, giving them just what they needed, even if they struggled to recognize it at the time. This last meal was a kind of hiding place for the disciples, meant to prepare them for what was to come when they left that room and entered the chaos of the days ahead.

But there was a hidden quality to that meal that went beyond the privateness of the space – there was something hidden in the elements, the bread and the wine shared. When Jesus took the bread, he broke it and shared it with his disciples, saying

Break Bread: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Pour Juice: And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. (Luke 22:17-20).....and when he spoke of not drinking of the vine again until the kingdom of God comes...

When Jesus shared the bread and the wine, he attested to a mystery that has drawn his disciples to this table ever since. For hidden in the bread shared and the wine passed around is the power of the Kingdom of God drawn near in the body and blood of Jesus. For in Jesus' life, the Kingdom of God has drawn near, bringing the first fruits of our peace with God, our peace with others, and our peace with all creation. Eating and drinking at that meal was thus an ordinary and extraordinary moment, for it involved at one and the same time the consumption of the ordinary elements of God's gift of food and at the same time it involved the powerful incorporation of

Jesus' disciples together with him, making them his body; it was that meal that would keep them, as it continues to keep us today, connected to the vine, branches receiving the nourishment Jesus gives. The disciples didn't see that deeper nourishment happening out in the open. Like the kingdom, this nourishment was hidden like yeast in dough, like prayers uttered to God in a secret, hidden place. Oh, but how powerful this nourishment was and remains even today.

Today, over 2000 years later and thousands of miles away from that upper room outside Jerusalem, the nourishment Jesus shared that day continues to be effective in this hidden, intimate space of remembrance. In this space and at this meal today, God provides us with shelter and a meal; a banquet spread out before us, to nourish us and to shape us into a people ready for the great banquet being prepared by God, the kingdom banquet prepared for the redeemed future, a future of peace for all. This meal prepared for us is being hosted by Jesus who has seen us and heard us in our need. At this meal, Jesus serves us and loves us, giving us just what we need, our daily bread. As we partake of these elements together today, may we experience the love and care of Jesus and may we become ever more joined to his life and his death, to his living for God and others and his dying for God and others, to his desire for the kingdom of God and his relinquishing of worldly power; finally, to his hallowing of God's name.

In just a moment, the Elders along with Ralph and Sue will come around with the communion elements. You can hold on to your elements and then once everyone has them, I will lead us in sharing them together.

The Bread: The Body of Christ, our peace, broken so that we might find peace with God, with others, and with creation.

The Cup: The Blood of Christ, our peace, poured out so that we might work for peace with God, with others, and with all creation.

Let us pray:

God, we give thanks for this meal today.

Having eaten the bread this morning, we pray that you would bring your kingdom of nourishment to this earth, that all may have bread and that none be left hungry.

Having drank of the cup this morning, we pray that you would bring your kingdom of peace to this earth, so that the cup of our suffering, the suffering of others, and the suffering of all creation, might be traded for the cup of your abundant love and peace.

For we pray this through Christ's name: AMEN.