

It's been a number of weeks ago that we began this little Sunday night series on peace...looking at practical ways of finding and acquiring peace...in a world that is, these days, anything but peaceful.

We said that one pathway to peace is the practice of ***forgiveness***.

Forgiveness. We take that counsel from the apostle Paul where he writes to the Colossian church, ***“Bear with each other and forgive one another...forgive as the Lord forgave you.”***¹

This is one of the means of letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

You can't carry resentment and hatred around with you and have inner-peace. It's just not possible...for one reason, because God, who has forgiven you, is calling you to forgive others. There's an element of conviction at play there, in any unforgiving spirit within us.

If you lack peace...if you're searching for peace, you may need to examine yourself to see if there is unforgiveness in your heart toward someone that God is trying to root out.

¹ Colossians 3:12-17

Pause

The following Sunday night, we said another pathway to peace is reconciliation...which is where forgiveness takes a person, sooner or later.

That idea comes from Matthew chapter 5, where Jesus talks about the need to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as with those outside the faith.

Ours is not to be their best buddies, necessarily, or to put ourselves in positions to be hurt or taken advantage of again and again. And...we can't control what other people do and how they respond to our initiatives.

But to be at peace within really requires us to be at peace with those around us...as far as it depends on us.

Reconciliation...or our best attempt at reconciliation with others...that's another pathway to peace.

In the previous messages, I started calling them, "highways to peace," and they are in that both forgiveness and reconciliation lead us quickly and efficiently to inner peace.

But then, if you take it another way, the idea of a highway is that it carries lots of traffic. And unfortunately, while lots of people are searching for peace, very few people, it seems, actually take these

routes to achieve it. So what God intends as a highway is really, in the practice of many, far more like a pathway...and one that is narrow and overgrown at that.

These are ways that could handle far more traffic than they see, typically.

Pause

Tonight, I present another highway...or pathway...or just way to peace, and that is...laughter.

Laughter.

Now, we know there is a time for it, because Ecclesiastes chapter 3 tells us that.

Pause

Those first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3...this is certainly the most well-known passage of this book and I'd think it's one of the most well-known passages of the Bible.

You can turn there with me, if you like...Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

Or maybe you know it by heart and can just follow along with me in your mind.

Or, if you were coming of age in the mid 1960's and listened to pop music, you can sing the Byrd's rendition of it, right?

I'd imagine it surprised a lot of strung out hippies to learn that these words were actually in the Bible.

***“To everything (turn, turn, turn) there is a season...and a time to every purpose under Heaven.
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.”***

Pause

Ecclesiastes is included as part of the Bible's wisdom literature. Traditionally thought to have been written by King Solomon, it's a work that searches out the purpose

of life by telling the story of a person, and then commenting on it.

As the story unfolds, it actually gets rather depressing. The word, “meaningless,” the idea that there is nothing new “under the sun,” and the return to the theme, “I thought I’d find meaning there, but I was wrong” come up over and over again. It’s a description of the difficulty, at times, of life.

But then, at the very end...in the last two verses of chapter 12...we arrive at, really the most important part of the work...the resolution of the problem.

“I have lived in these ways...I have seen these things...I have pondered the meanings, and in the final analysis, here’s what I’ve concluded: Although life in our world can be difficult and inconsistent, we must:

- 1) fear God (which, you know, means to establish a right relationship with Him...to revere Him as the God He is;
- 2) obey His commands – value what He says to value, think as He says to think, do as God says to do, and then:
- 3) trust that God will judge, in the end, everything that is done. Leave it all, both the known and unknown, to God to sort out in the end. We can trust He will do that.

That is the essence of the work...and frankly, simply embracing that...embracing the overall message of this

work here, is part of finding peace. No matter what is going on in our world...no matter how meaningless or hopeless or discombobulated things are or seem to be, it's not new, you see?

Whatever our world may be like, it's been like this before. People have felt the way we feel before.

This guy – this teacher, whether it was Solomon or someone else...this guy, thousands of years ago, felt exactly the same way many, many people feel today:

Where is the world heading?

Where is my nation heading?

Why is there so much injustice?

Why do things seem to unpredictable?

Why do the unrighteous prosper?

Why do holy people suffer?

Where can I find truth that I can really trust?

This guy felt all of these things too, in a completely different part of the world, in a different time, and in a totally different culture.

And after considering it all very thoroughly, his conclusion is...first, there are just some things we'll never totally understand, and so, for the sake of our own peace, we must:

- 1) fear God,
- 2) obey His commands, and,

3) trust judgment to Him.

So this overall message of Ecclesiastes is, in itself, a pathway to peace, you see?

Pause

But...within this book there is something more...there is this section, here in chapter 3, about timing...or maybe translated, “seasons.”

This is one of the only other, what might seem to be hopeful or positive parts of this book, and it declares that, even as confusing and unjust and disordered as the world might seem to be, the truth of the matter is, there is an order to even that which might seem to us to be chaos.

There is a time...there is a season...there is a fitness and sensibility to the way God has made the world that is still in play...that is still operating...still effective.

I know that looking out at a broken world, we're tempted, at times, to think that there is no order...that chaos has overtaken, that evil has triumphed, and that there is no reason for anything pleasant anymore...pleasant thoughts, pleasant hopes, pleasant feelings.

But that is not the case.

Even as the teacher here questions and doubts and wonders as he looks out over his world, he declares that the seasons that God put into place at creation still exist.

As nutty as the world seems, God still enforces boundaries on the bad.

Yes, people die here, but people are also being born. Life goes on.

Yes, plants are harvested here, but plants are also being sown.

Yes, people are killed here, but people are also being healed.

Yes, there is mourning...but so is there dancing...just not in our gym.

He goes on and on, naming...affirming the presence of bad...but also good...and so this declaration of order and times and seasons is also an encouragement within the encouragement that is the greater book.

You want to experience peace even in difficulty?

Here's one path toward that: fear God, obey His commands, and, trust judgment to Him because...He still is the God of order...of time...of season for both the happy and the sad of life.

Pause

And yet, within this text here, within the whole of the book, there is even one more affirmation that speaks peace to a conflicted soul...and that is the affirmation that while there may well be seasons for tears, there are also seasons for laughter.

Yes there are times to weep, but there are also times to laugh.

What is laughter?

The Encyclopedia Britannica says it is, “rhythmic, vocalized, expiratory and involuntary actions.” Fifteen facial muscles contract and stimulation of the zygomatic major muscle (the main lifting mechanism of your upper lip) occurs.

At the same time, the respiratory system is upset by the epiglottis half-closing the larynx, so that air intake occurs irregularly, making you gasp.

Also, in most cases of laughter, the tear ducts are at least somewhat activated, so that while the mouth is opening and closing and the struggle for oxygen intake continues, the face becomes moist and often red or purple. The noises that usually accompany this bizarre behavior range from sedate giggles to very loud roars.

All human laughter consists of variations on a basic form of short, vowel-like notes repeated every 210

milliseconds. Laughter can be of the "ha-ha-ha" variety or the "ho-ho-ho" type but not a mixture of both.

Humans also have a neurological system that acts as a detector of laughter, which, when we hear it, triggers other neural circuits in the brain, which, in turn, generates more laughter. This explains why laughter is contagious.

Behavioral neurobiologist and pioneering laughter researcher Robert Provine jokes that he has encountered one major problem in his study of laughter, and that is that laughter almost always disappears just when he is ready to observe it -- especially in the laboratory.

Because of the nature of what causes laughter, which is how quickly our brain recognizes the incongruity that lies at the heart of most humor and then attaches an abstract meaning to it...because of that, laughter in a lab study session is almost impossible to examine.

So real, actual humor, and what we might call a sense of humor – someone recognizing the presence of humor – those are the things required for laughter.

And right here, you see, is Scripture telling us that, no matter what may be happening in our lives at the moment, this present season will eventually pass and seasons of healing and mending and birth...and even laughter...will come.

Even if there is no humor on the horizon...it will return. It's part of God's created order...part of his economy, and with it, that light-heartedness and happiness and the ability to smile and grin and chuckle and laugh.

That is the assurance we find here, that even though the world, or maybe just our own, private world, seems to have flipped it's lid, we can find peace by:

Fearing God,
Obeying His commands, and
Trusting judgment to Him...because...He is still the God of order...of time...of the seasons of life...and that same God assures us that a season of laughter is on it's way.

Can I just end with an example of this?

Isaac, or Yitzhak, means laughter. And we know where it comes from in name form, right?

Right out of here.

It's the story of Abraham and Sarah...the story of their season...their long season of tears that were turned, overnight, into a completely unexpected, miraculous season of laughter.

Michael Card wrote a song about it, titled, "They Called Him Laughter."

A barren land and a barren wife,
Made Abraham laugh at his wandering life.
A cruel joke it seemed then to call him the father of
nations.
A heavenly prank, a celestial joke,
Because gray hair and babies leave no room for hope.
But hoping was something this hopeless old man
learned to do.

A cry in the darkness and laughter at night,
An elderly couple sit holding him tight.
An improbable infant, a punchline, a promise come true.

They laughed 'til they wept, then they laughed at their
tears.

This miracle baby they'd wanted for years,
Would make a Messiah who'd give us impossible joy.

And then the chorus says:

They called him laughter, because he came after,
The Father had made an impossible promise come true.
The birth of a baby to a hopeless old lady,
So they called him laughter, cause no other name would
do.

Father, help us to take peace in our right relationship
with you, in obeying Your commands, and in trusting
judgment to you.

Help us to know that you are still the God of order...the God of time...the God of the seasons of life...and in the fact that you assure us a the return of a season of laughter.