

Sermon 1-17-21 Fruit of the Spirit — Peace
Kim Fields
Central Church

Let me ask, “Why did you join us for worship today?” What is it you hope to find or, better yet, come away with? I know that many of us live our lives at full speed. Our lives are hectic. We seldom allow ourselves time to slow down. We often come to worship worn down, strung out, and frazzled at the edges. We come to worship hoping for a moment of peace. We long for a quiet respite from the busyness of the week.

If that is why you came, let me offer you a gift. Let me offer the gift of a peace-filled moment. Settle yourself comfortably in your chair. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath and then let it out slowly. Forget about what is happening around you. Breathe. As you breathe out, let your worries go. Breathe and relax. Now, let your imagination flow. Imagine that you are floating down a quiet river on your back. The sun is shining down, warming you. The river slowly winds its way through a beautiful wood. You can hear the gentle babble of the water. You admire the stately pines, the beautiful wildflowers. You can feel the gentle breeze against your skin. Smell the scent of the flowers, the pines. Hear the birds singing. Relax. Rest. Let your troubles flow away with the current of the water.

Slowly float over to the edge of the river and climb out into the meadow in front of you. There is a path. Follow it. Take your time. Smell the flowers. Enjoy the warmth of the sun. On the far side of the meadow, the path leads to a large tree and there, in the tree, is a door. Knock on the door. Slowly the door opens and standing there is Jesus. He greets you and reaches out and touches you, healing your hurts, calming your fears. Enjoy being with him. But, know that you cannot stay. Your time to remain with Jesus has not yet come. So say, “Goodbye,” and close the door behind you. Take a deep breath. Slowly let it out. And as you let it out, come back. Open your eyes when you are ready.

Did you experience a bit of peace? Do you wish you could stay there in that meadow with Jesus? Is peace something you long for and hope for? Do you wish that your life, your church, this world, could be a bit more like that meadow? Do you long for a time or place where your problems fade away and you can find peace?

If that is what you long for, let me give you a bit of advice. Get over it. Just get over it. I hate to burst your bubble, but that is not the kind of peace Christ offers, at least not in this life. It may be something we long for, but I fear we will not find it, at least not for long. The world just doesn't work that way. As long as we are a part of this world, we are not going to escape from conflict and troubles. We won't. We can't.

Let me share a true story. It is the story of a retired couple who grew so fearful of the threats of crime, violence, and nuclear destruction that they decided that their only hope of survival was to move to a safer place. They carefully researched the inhabited parts of the globe searching for the safest, most peaceful, place they could find. Finally, they settled on a new home. Their first Christmas there they sent a card to their former pastor explaining that their island home was paradise. There was little crime. It had been at peace for over 100 years. Better yet, it was isolated and had few resources, making it an unlikely target of nearby nations. They had found their place of peace.

Where had they moved? They had relocated to the Falkland Islands. The year was 1981 and, as you may recall, the very next Spring the **Falklands became a war zone**, as first Argentina and then Great Britain invaded. So much for finding a place of peace in this world.

The truth is, it doesn't matter where we move, we will never find a place that is free from conflict. It doesn't matter how many police we hire, how hard we try to combat terrorism, how many prisons we build, how high the gates around our community, or how many security systems we install, none of us will ever be completely safe. There is no such thing as peace in this life. That is one of the powerful reminders of 9/11 of two weeks ago.

Oh, we may think we have found a place of peace, but it is only an illusion. It won't last. Try as we might, we cannot create peace. I know, because my grandfather tried. Growing up, there was one rule at my grandfather's house. His rule was that family did not fight. Families lived in peace. Which meant that we never discussed our differences, ever. On the surface our family was peaceful. But, it was the peace of an undisturbed infection, that could not heal until brought to the surface. It was the peace of Mt. St. Helens before the eruption. All was calm and quiet on the surface, but we all knew that the pressures were building underneath. And every so often someone would blow. The pressure would release in a big

explosion, the illusion of peace would be shattered, and then things would quiet down for a time. Most of the time, we were able to pretend that we were one big peaceful family, but it wasn't really peace. It wasn't healthy. More importantly, it had nothing to do with the kind of peace Christ promised. It was a false peace, a denial of reality, and as such, it could not last.

Christ's peace, on the other hand, has nothing to do with denying reality. Neither is it the peace that comes from giving in and appeasing tyrants, compromising with evil, or refusing to stand up to bullies. Like my family, you can create an illusion of peace for a time by being careful not to rock the boat or by letting sleeping dogs lie. But, doing that only buys time. It does not last. Nor is it the kind of peace that Paul was speaking of.

Recall what Christ said about peace. He said, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."** — John 14:27

The peace that the world offers, that Christ spoke of, is the peace of my family. It is the peace that many churches foster. It is the peace of denying the problems around us and locking ourselves away in our sanctuaries shielded from the evils of the world. It is the peace of illusion, of refusing to see the conflict all around us. But as my family discovered, as the family who sought to escape to the Falkland Islands discovered, that kind of peace does not last. The pressures build and then...

As John said, this is not the peace that Christ gives. So, what is the peace that Christ offers? It is the peace that Paul wrote of in Galatians. You remember what he wrote. He wrote, **"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."** — Galatians 5:22

Peace is a fruit of the Spirit. Like love and joy, it is a gift of the Spirit and, as such, not dependent on what is going on around us. I am reminded of the story of the bishop who was charged with overseeing the construction of a mighty cathedral. When the cathedral was completed, it turned out to be all he had hoped for. It was inspiring and it was busy. It was a hive of activity, filled with God's people, doing the work of God. The bishop loved it at first. But in time, he came to feel that something more was needed. Busyness was not enough. There needed to be a place for prayer and

quiet meditation. So, he added a small prayer chapel, where people could escape to pray and meditate, where they could find a place of peace. To help set the mood for his chapel, he commissioned a painting to be hung behind the altar. He invited two of his favorite artists to submit sketches from which he would select the one that best illustrated the peace of Christ.

The first artist came back with a sketch of one of the most peaceful scenes anyone could imagine. It showed a still lake, set high in the mountains at nightfall. The trees and moon were reflected on the water. It was calm and quiet, the very embodiment of peace. The bishop almost commissioned the painting then and there, but decided that in fairness, he should wait until he had seen what the other artist proposed. As it turned out, he was glad he did.

The second artist's offering was very different. He also chose to **depict a mountain scene** at night. But his mountain was engulfed in a mighty storm. Lightning crashed, rain poured down, trees bent over in the wind. In the center of the drawing was a waterfall, fed by the storm. Its waters cascaded down onto the rocks below and in the very center of those rocks, almost obscured by the foam of the raging waters, was **a bird's nest**. And on the nest sat a mother robin, peacefully watching over her eggs, secure in the knowledge that her nest was protected by the rocks that surrounded it.

To his surprise, the bishop chose the second drawing. For, as he explained, it reflected the peace of Christ. You see, Christ's peace is not an absence of conflict. It is a peace that is found in the midst of conflict, and is founded on the rock of Christ. Indeed, as Christians, we are called to serve in the midst of conflict. As Paul discovered, our peace is not an absence of trouble. It is a peace which comes from trusting in Christ.

Our peace is like that of the child who went out for a **walk with his grandfather**. After they had walked through the woods for a time, the old man asked, "Do you know where we are?" His grandson answered, "Nope." "Could you find your way home?" "Nope." "Well then, aren't you worried?" "Nope." "Why not?" "Because I am with you Grandpa and you know the way."

The Hebrew word for peace is "Shalom". Shalom is not the absence of conflict. Shalom is all about relationship. Shalom is being in right

relationship with God in whom we trust for our safety and future. This means that our peace is not dependent on knowing the way. Our peace comes from walking with Christ, who has promised to never leave us or forsake us and who knows the way. Thus, the Psalmist was able to say with confidence, **“The Lord is my light and salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?”**
Psalm 27:1

How can we trust in this peace? We can trust because of the presence of the Spirit who assures us that Christ’s promises are true. It is the same Spirit of whom Christ said, **“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”** (John 14:26) If we let him, the Spirit speaks to us, reminding us who we are and whose we are, and who it is that secures our future hope. It is the Spirit who assures us that God is real, that our faith is true, and that ultimately, finally, all will be well. That is why Paul speaks of peace as a fruit of the Spirit.

Which means that when we are in need of peace, the place to find it is not in withdrawal from the world. Peace is not found in walled compounds, secured by guards. Peace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given to those who trust in and seek to grow deeper with God.

Not that that gift will necessarily look like what the world calls peace. It is not a peace that sweeps problems under the rug and denies them. It is a peace that confronts problems and works for reconciliation and healing. It is the peace found at the eye of a hurricane. It is the peace of a life grounded in the rock which is God. But, above all, it is a peace founded on a relationship with the Spirit. Which means it takes work and time to develop. It comes slowly, over time, as we learn to trust in the Spirit. It requires patience to develop. Patience, interestingly enough, will be the fruit we look at next week.

But, for this week, let’s continue to memorize Galatians 5:22 as we add yet one more word to the passage: **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, and peace.”**