

“Standing in Grace”

Are you at peace this morning? There are different ways to think about this. There’s peace in the world, which can feel like a pie-in-the-sky dream, in the sense that world peace doesn’t seem very realistic. We pray for it. We keep working toward it, but even with positive thoughts sent into the world there’s a lot of conflict out there. So, when I ask if you are at peace this morning I’m not discounting the world but that’s not really the question. What about peace in our relationships? This kind of peace is impacted by the levels of tension we feel with co-workers, or with friends and family. As a pastor there is regular opportunity to connect with families involved in significant events like weddings and funerals. In fact, this past week I officiated at one of each. These types of family gatherings bring out the best and sometimes the worst in people. We know these events have significant levels of stress. So, it happens, tensions rise and fall in our life with others. We care deeply about this, and there’s not one of us that does not wish for improvement in our relationships, but neither is this the peace I’m asking about today. Are you at peace this morning? What I’m asking is, are you at peace with God? Are you at peace in your innermost being, at peace spiritually so that even when you are surrounded by stress and conflict in the world you are encouraged by what we sing in the old hymns, that a “blessed assurance” makes us certain “it is well with my soul”? Way back in the 4th century, St. Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This inner peace connects to all of the other levels of peacefulness in our lives. If we’re not right with God that restlessness shows up in other ways. When our spirits are conflicted we are likely to view the world and others less accurately, less faithfully. When we’re not solid at our core there is the potential we are shaky everywhere else. I’m reminded of the parable Jesus once told about the foundation of a house. Do you remember it? He said that when a house is built on rock and the rains and floods come the house stays strong. But, if that house is built on sand the rains and floods wash the house away. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he turned to Peter, who was with the other disciples one day, and said “upon this rock I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:18) Our peace with God rests upon the rock-solid certainty that when God is for us no one can be against us. This morning I’m encouraging a gut check on all of this. Are we at peace with God and are we building our lives upon that foundation?

If you are not sure how to respond to the question, you are in good company. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he was aware they were constantly anxious and unsure. It’s important to note we are talking about the early Christian community in Rome. Rome was the heart of the empire. The emperor, whose palace as in Rome, self-identified as “divi filius,” which in the Latin means “son of God,” The emperor understood himself to be a god and, as such, was to be worshipped. All authority and loyalty was given to the emperor. Because Rome was Caesar’s house all who lived there were reminded who held the power. The Roman Christians moved within the fearful shadow of Rome’s control. Their lives were not secure. Their futures were uncertain. Not only was their sleep restless, every day the threat of the emperor pressed down upon them. Now, the Apostle Paul experienced his own persecution. He knew first hand the threats of Roman against the church. All of this is on his mind when he wrote that suffering produces endurance and endurance builds character and character leads to hope. This isn’t a thinly veiled hope. This isn’t some impossible dream that will never be true. The hope about which Paul wrote is a hope that will not disappoint. Despite all of the conflict that raged around them, Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be at peace. This peace is possible, said Paul, because of what God had poured into their hearts. If Paul were here this morning and asking us the question “Are you at peace?” he would want us to share in the confidence our faith makes possible. Whether it’s the ancient world of Rome or in our world today, God gives us a foundation in Christ. This is why Jesus can say about the church built upon the rock that “not even the gates of hell will prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)

Just over a week ago, pastors and lay representatives from local churches gathered in Lakeside, Ohio for the West Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The theme of the week was “Be Not Afraid - Hope.” Throughout the week, we heard testimony from individuals about what God was making possible in their lives. I’d like to share one of these testimonies with you. This video clip introduces sisters, Alyson and Andrea Hoffman. These young women are living out the peace that God is pouring into their souls. Let’s take a listen. [To view the video clip go here: [Testimony to Hope](#)]

These young women have a life story that inspires us. Their courage is possible because they are experiencing what Paul wrote: suffering leads to endurance which leads to strength of character which leads to hope. What God is doing in them God is ready to do in us. We can be sure of this because God gives the Hoffman sisters and each of us a gift. The gift is grace. The peace and hope we experience comes from grace, a grace, Paul says, in

which we stand. When we stand we naturally think of what's beneath our feet but when it comes to God's grace it's more than just what's happening beneath our feet. When we stand in grace it's more like standing in a stream of grace. We are showered with it. In the days of this week we will find ourselves in moments of anxiety and tension. This might happen when you think about the areas of conflict in the church or in the world. It might be when you are with others at your work or in your families. Whatever the situation you are standing in a stream of grace in those moments. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called this Prevenient Grace, a grace that is given to us even when we are not aware. The message of the bible for today wants us to open our eyes to the grace in which we stand. The Hoffman twins are certainly aware of it and when our awareness grows the places of conflict in our lives become moments when God gives birth to a new hope. I loved when the sisters said that God enables us "to focus on others...to be peacemakers...to do justice and spread love...to set aside anger and forgive, and," they said, "to forgive some more." And through it all the sisters said they know we "are loved by a gracious God and we are all children of God." In the days of this week be ready for the specific places and times when God makes this hope-filled, grace-solid message clear to you.

It was true of the Roman Church and it's true of us. We stand in a stream of grace, not just here and on Sunday mornings but every moment of every day. Are we at peace with God? Yes, because of what God places in our hearts. Are we at peace with God? Yes, because God's amazing grace is creating us more and more into those who endure so that we will be those who hope.