

SERMON: Pursuing the Peace of Christ

TEXT: John 14:15-17, 25-27

*Miss Congeniality* is one of my favorite movies. It's a comedy starring Sandra Bullock, one of my favorite actresses. She plays Gracie Hart, a tough, boyish, unsophisticated FBI agent who gets assigned to work undercover as a contestant in the Miss United States pageant, where a crime is expected to take place. The comedy, of course, is that she is in no way cut out for the job. She has to undergo intensive coaching and grooming in a very short amount of time. She has to be taught how to speak and eat and walk in a ladylike manner – something she never learned and obviously does not come naturally to her.

When it comes time for the pageant, she looks beautiful and seems to be fitting in nicely with the other contestants. In the portion of the competition that judges a contestant's thoughtfulness and eloquence, the same question is asked of each one: *What is one thing our society needs most?* The common answer is one that has become a worn-out cliché from pageants over the years: *world peace*. Each woman gives this answer without hesitation, until it comes to Gracie. With a big, beautiful smile she gives her answer to what society needs most: "Harsher punishment for parole violators." When she noticed the stunned silence of the audience, she quickly adds, "and world peace."

It really has become terribly cliché, hasn't it? Not just in beauty pageants or scholarship essays, but every time we hear of wars or rumors of wars. Every time there is heated and sometimes violent conflict that divides and destroys families and communities, races and genders, denominations and even individual churches. Every time negotiations break down or someone leaves the room, slamming the door behind them, we cry out for peace. And we wonder why peace is so elusive.

I sometimes begin to feel like peace is just a word we throw around as a quick answer to what's wrong with the world. But we usually mean for it to be someone else's responsibility. *That* country needs to be more peaceful. *Those people*, that other race, those foreigners, that other political party, that sister, that father, that spouse. *They* are the ones causing the problems. *They* are the source of the conflict. *They* are responsible for making peace.

One of our scriptures for today is Psalm 34. We heard it read aloud and we also called ourselves to worship with the first three verses of praise and exaltation. The Psalmist, presumably David, goes on to testify that the Lord has answered his prayers and delivered him from all his fears. He proclaims that "those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." Then he addresses his readers as children, imploring them to listen as he teaches them the fear of the Lord, how to show reverence and

respect for the God who is our refuge. “Keep your tongue from evil,” he advises, “and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”

Seek peace, and pursue it. I love the way these words describe peace as not just an idea, not just a condition or a state of being, and not just a dream. Peace is something to be sought out, something to be pursued, something that we must work for. David implies that when we are in pursuit of peace, we are showing respect and reverence for God. To pursue peace, according to the Good News translation of the Bible is to, “Strive for peace with all your heart.” The Aramaic Bible in Plain English says, “Seek peace and run after it!”

When I think of the word *pursue*, I think of the police in hot pursuit of a criminal, speeding down the highway with sirens blaring. I think of young people who are eager and working hard to earn scholarships or achieve high honors or excel in their sport. I think of someone who is working toward a goal to lose weight or to run a marathon or to start their own business. I think of musicians who sing their hearts out to land a recording contract, or actors who are working their way up to performing on Broadway. I think of TV competition shows like American Idol and Dancing with the Stars and Jeopardy. I think of a friend whose

son is an Olympic hopeful in the sport of archery, and he eats, sleeps, and breathes with a focus on training and improving. And the whole family sacrifices to allow him to travel around the country for tournaments and competitions. And whether we know them personally or not, we cheer them on: “You got this! You can do it! Keep after it! Don’t give up! We’re behind you!”

This is the kind of energy and focus and attention we need to put into pursuing peace. More specifically, PURSUING THE PEACE OF CHRIST.

The verses we read from the Gospel of John are a part of a long *farewell discourse*, containing the advice and warnings and assurances of Jesus spoken to his disciples at his last meal with them. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” he reminds them. But knowing that they are fearful of a future without him, Jesus promises that the Father will send them an Advocate – the Holy Spirit – to be with them forever.

Later, when Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you,” he is not just wishing them, “Shalom,” like one would say “goodbye.” One scholar explained that this promise of peace was another way for Jesus to assure the disciples that they would not be alone. “The disciples will not be orphans – that is, they will not be alone –

because they will live in the peace of Jesus. The peace that Jesus offers is not the world's peace – neither the false promise of security... nor the end of conflict. The peace that Jesus gives is *his* peace, a peace that derives from the heart of Jesus' life.... The promise of Jesus' peace is not an occasion for complacency, however.” Earlier in his farewell, Jesus prayed to God, ‘Let them not be cowardly,’ which “reinforces the fact that these are not sentimental imperatives, simply telling the disciples not to worry, but calling the disciples to find strength to face” what the future will bring. (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John, p. 751)

It sounds reassuring. It sounds like something we would want to hear before being left alone. But it also implies that any concern or trepidation is well-founded. For the disciples, life with Jesus has not been easy, but it will become even more difficult after his death and resurrection.

You may be surprised – and possibly disappointed – to know that the peace of Christ is NOT anything like the *peace and quiet* that we like to enjoy on a lazy Sunday afternoon. It has nothing to do with closing your eyes and putting your feet up and relaxing.

Peace requires stepping outside your comfort zone, reaching out to people you don't know or don't agree with, having difficult conversations with people who are different, listening to understand their struggles, and discovering the privilege we have. Here at First Presbyterian Church, we have made a good start toward peace in our community through our work with One City and our discussions around of the book *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. It is a good start! But we mustn't stop there. We have more work to do.

As we read from Paul's letter to the Philippians, the peace of Christ "passes all understanding." This peace involves not simply gentleness, but generosity and consideration of others, as indicated by one Biblical scholar suggesting a more accurate translation of the original Greek. This peace is achieved when God is near; it is free from worry, but drenched in prayer and supplication and thanksgiving. This peace is accomplished when our minds and hearts and actions are focused on whatever is true, whatever is honorable and just, whatever is pure and pleasing and commendable. When we "keep on doing" all that our faith has taught us, "the God of peace will be with [us]."

Peace is a verb. Peace is not just a state of being. Peace requires action. Peace begins with knowing and following Christ and believing that the Spirit is

present with us to provide inspiration and courage and power to continue his ministry. Peace begins at the Lord's Table. As we share in his body and blood, we as a congregation are infused by his Spirit. As we share the bread and the cup, we are nurtured to become more like him, to grow into the one Body of Christ, into a people of peace.

PURSUING THE PEACE OF CHRIST is something that we are called to do not just for ourselves, but for our children and grandchildren, for our community, the world.... To the glory of God!

AMEN.