

SERMON: Seek Peace and Pursue It
TEXT: Psalm 34

10-2-22

All the pieces have come together so nicely today. We worship in the beautiful outdoors, in the midst of our downtown neighborhood. We gather in this park that was created and dedicated as a place of peace, to send a message of peace, to offer welcome and belonging to all who pass by. Two separate congregations join as one on this day to sing together, to pray together, to gather around the Lord's Table, and to share table fellowship at mealtime. Just down the street, the Mighty Mississippi River connects us with people from the northernmost to the southernmost ends of our country. With all these pieces in place, we celebrate World Communion Sunday, and we hope to demonstrate the acceptance, cooperation, unity, and peace that the world so desperately needs.

Psalm 34 also applies to what we're doing here today in a number of ways. We are here to worship. To bless the Lord, to praise, to boast, to "magnify the Lord and exalt God's name

together." We acknowledge and proclaim that God has "heard our cries" and "delivered us from our fears." As we share in the sacrament, we will "taste and see that the Lord is good." More than once, the Psalmist urges listeners to "fear" the Lord, which is to acknowledge our dependence on God and to respond with obedience. "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it."

For several years, those words from verse 14, SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT, keep coming back to me and have helped me to understand peace in a different way. It seems to me that we seek peace for ourselves in a sort of passive way. We often wait for peace to find us. To seek it is an exercise of the mind or the heart or the spirit. We look for peace. We wonder where peace can be found. We pray for peace. The only activity involved is to find a quiet place to find some peace in solitude.

But it's that word, *pursue* that strikes me as a very different, much more active way to seek peace. When I think of the word *pursue*, I imagine police on a high-speed chase, in *hot pursuit* of a dangerous criminal. To pursue peace is to go after it, to work hard for it, to take risks for it, to sweat for it, to lose your breath for it. This seems like the kind of activity that is not for personal gain, but to improve our relationships with others and to seek peace for all of humanity. Especially those who are "brokenhearted and crushed in spirit." This is God's vision and God's desire. It's out there, and it's possible, but we need to somehow get a hold of it, to make it manifest. To make it real.

"Let There Be Peace on Earth" is an old hymn that many of us know and could sing by heart. But there's a wonderful story behind the song that I never knew until I googled it just the other day. I was really just hunting for the year it was written, but I found much more.

Jill Jackson, who wrote the lyrics, said this in an interview on National Public Radio: *When I attempted suicide [in 1944] and I didn't succeed," she said, "I knew for the first time unconditional love—which God is. You are totally loved, totally accepted, just the way you are.* "This realization was followed by years of exploring her spiritual nature and her relationship with God. Jackson discovered her love for writing, and began writing songs with Sy Miller after they married in 1949. In 1955, she wrote the lyrics for *Let There Be Peace on Earth*, while her husband wrote the melody."

"Later, Sy Miller wrote about the effect of the song: *One summer evening in 1955, a group of 180 teenagers of all races and religions, meeting at a workshop high in the California mountains locked arms, formed a circle and sang a song of peace.... When they came down from the mountain, these inspired young people brought the song with them and started sharing it. And, as though on wings, 'Let There Be Peace on Earth' began an amazing journey around the globe. It traveled*

first, of course, with the young campers back to their homes and schools, churches and clubs.

The song was then shared in all 50 states at school graduations, PTA meetings, holiday gatherings, celebrations of Brotherhood Week, Veterans Day, Human Rights Day, and United Nations Day. Kiwanis clubs sang it, as well as 4-H clubs, United Auto Workers, the American Legion, the B'nai B'rith, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)." (History of Hymns: "Let There Be Peace On Earth", June 12, 2013, www.umcdiscipleship.org)

Nearly seventy years later, "Let There Be Peace on Earth" is a hymn that feels dated. It's a bit campy and even more schmaltzy. But the words remain true, and the prayer sincere: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

People of God, peace does begin with us. We need to find God's peace within ourselves before we can be peacemakers with others. Even amid the suffering of our world, especially in this

time of deep conflict and chaos, may we *pursue* with all that we are and all that we have, the peace of God which is beyond our understanding.

May we SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT... to the glory of God!

AMEN.