

This past week I was blessed to attend the “Fierce” Women’s Gathering event in Tipp City, Ohio. This event was held for the first time this year when Pastor Rachel Billups of Gighamsburg Church discerned a need for women in leadership in the church to connect and empower one another. So, the Holy Spirit started nagging me. “It looks like a great event Jessie.” Then the excuses came: “It is too far away, how will I find childcare for Dean for that long? I don’t want to be away from the charge.” And yet, the Holy Spirit persisted and made everything fall into place so that I could go.

Once I was there, I understood why God had called me to that place. So often in ministry we only hear of each other’s successes. It is so easy to compare ourselves with our amazing colleagues in ministry and feel like we are not doing anything for the kingdom of God. It was amazing for me to see these very successful women of God share about their failures, their struggles, their hopes, and their journeys as they continue to answer the calling that God has placed upon their lives.

The talk that was the most influential for me was by a Nazarene pastor, Rachel Kuhn. She shared about the power of telling our stories, and that our original story comes from the story of God and God’s people. She gave this beautiful analogy of a school bus. She said, “Imagine that all your stories live in a big yellow school bus. As you walk onto the bus you first see your favorite stories in the front, the stories you love to tell. As you get to the middle of the bus you see your best friend and share your secret stories that connect you.” Then she said, “Many of us do not want to tell our back of the bus stories.” Stories we view as failure, but these stories are powerful and show Christ’s redemptive work in our lives.

This imagery of the back of the bus stories was powerful to me. We all have stories like this and yet so often we do not share them with one another. Not sharing our stories can cause conflict and warring within ourselves as we fail to process and let go of negative things we have experienced or bad choices we have made.

Throughout the Bible we see people warring with themselves, God, and one another. In Genesis 25, we see Jacob and Esau warring together even in the womb. This war continued as Jacob stole Esau’s rightful birth rite and blessing through deception. All of this came to ahead a Peniel where Jacob was at war and wrestled with God.

This is my call story. This is my back of the bus story. God called me to ministry and time and time again, I wrestled with God. I said, “No, not yet.”

I was called to ministry in Gadsen South Carolina on a mission trip at sixteen years old beneath the ashes of a church that had been burned down by the KKK. Just like going to this conference, I made a million excuses of why I was not ready to say yes to God’s calling upon my life and yet, God pursued me, God forgave me, and God redeemed me.

Like myself, the disciples had a back of the bus story. They had abandoned Jesus, they had abandoned God’s calling upon their life when they hid from and denied their Savior. How do you come back from that? We find them in our Scripture for today all together in a locked room waiting...hoping that what Jesus said was true that he would come back from the dead.

I wonder what Jesus thought about the disciples. They betrayed him, they denied him, and they did not believe that he was back from the dead. **Instead of greeting the disciples with harsh words, a punishment they deserved, Jesus Christ greeted them with peace.**

Jesus’ best friends let him down, yet in John 20 Jesus’ first words to the disciples after his resurrection were, “Peace be with you.” Even though this type of greeting was a common Jewish custom, I don’t know if you or I could greet those that deserted us in our death with these same words. Also, Jesus said it twice. I think he did this to make sure the disciples knew that he forgave them.

It is amazing to recognize the peace that Christ offers to us through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Our Scripture for today calls us to offer this same peace to others so that we can be reconciled to God and one another.

Today we continue our “Blessed Sermon Series: Wisdom from the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ.” We uplift these words: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). We have talked about various attributes of God that Christ calls us to embody like being poor in spirit, mourning that the kingdom of God has not yet come, being meek, and being pure in heart. I think that being a peacemaker is probably one of the hardest things that Christ calls us to do.

Following Christ invites us into a war. A war against sin, a war against the forces of wickedness, and a war against ourselves as we strive to be the people God has called us to be. I think this why Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”¹ (Matthew 10:34). In our pursuit of seeking the peace of Christ we find ourselves at war with so many things.

Perhaps we are at war with our family or friends as we struggle in our relationships. Perhaps we are at war with ourselves as we carry around hurt and regret from years past. Perhaps, like Jacob, we are at war with God and cannot understand God’s plan for our lives. We make the mistake of trying to stop these wars by ourselves we think: “I am strong enough. I am smart enough. I must be able to figure out a way to fix this mess.”

And yet, no one can fix the messes of our lives, but God. This same God who took the identity of God of “I AM” (Exodus 3:14) from the Old Testament and gave us the gift of Jesus Christ, the one who said, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). God saves us from the wars and struggles of this life and calms the stormy seas of our souls. When the disciples thought they would drown in the middle of the violent storm Christ said to the storm: “Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:39). And it was so.

For us to be peacemakers, we must be people who are at peace with God, one another, and ourselves. This is after all what the greatest commandment calls us to do to “Love the God [our] God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength....and to love [our] neighbor as ourselves” (Matthew 22:37-39). We can seek peace when we share our back of the bus stories with God and one another. This is how we start to move forward as peacemakers: repentance leads to reconciliation.

We are at peace with God when we acknowledge that the struggle is real. Like the prophet Jeremiah said, “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD” (Jeremiah 17:5). We are made in the image of God, which is good, but we must recognize that we need God’s help. This is what repentance is all about. A time to acknowledge our own weakness and God’s power. As we seek peace with God we rely on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the advocate Christ left for us as he told the disciples “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). Even during chaos or confusion in our lives, God gives us the peace of the Holy Spirit. I strongly believe in the power of prayer because this is one of the places where we can strongly feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the places we can feel God’s peace.

I have given you today a picture of a prayer labyrinth on the front of your bulletin. Prayer labyrinths are beautiful because they represent leaving everything in this world on the outside as we pursue God on the inside.

This is what the journey of prayer is about. We are also called to work on our relationship with God by studying the Bible. This is how we can more clearly pick out God’s voice in our lives among all the other voices.

We are called to seek peace among one another. We draw closer together when we share our back of the bus stories with each other. Stories of when we were at war with ourselves or God, ourselves, or others. To be peacemakers we have to do the hard work of loving ourselves. When we are at war with ourselves it affects our outlook and our behavior. It affects the way we share the good news. How can we exhibit the peace of Christ if we do not feel peaceful? We must let go.

For me this letting go and answering God’s calling on my life happened in my sophomore year of college, when I could not take the war within myself any longer. I was finally able to say yes to God’s calling of ministry on my life and in that moment found profound peace.

We find common ground in our struggle of humanity: when we face our battles in this world. It is in our struggles that peacemakers work. Mother Theresa fostered peace by living among the poorest of the poor and offering them grace and love. Martin Luther King Jr. fostered peace through racial reconciliation and teaching people how-to live-in harmony together and practice forgiveness.

Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King heard many back of the bus stories and used them to understand the people they served. These peacemakers embodied God’s reconciliation for our lives. Mother Teresa showed all people were important to God, even the poorest of the poor. Martin Luther King showed that words of peace and hope of a future of unity, was more powerful than any act of violence.

There is a common theme among peacemakers, the theme of reconciliation; both of these peacemakers believed that everyone was in need of God’s reconciliation. As Maxie Dunnam says, “We cannot experience peace without reconciling ourselves to God and to others.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus Christ was the ultimate peacemaker. His death on the cross and resurrection brought us back into a right relationship with God and the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to offer others peace. **This is the good news friends: that through Christ’s death on the cross we can help bring other people into this amazing relationship with God through the way we treat them.** This is how we can be known as children of God.

Just like I experienced at the Fierce Event, we have to start sharing our back of the bus stories. These stories show our humanity, and they also show God’s radical love for us and the promise of reconciliation. Our stories connect us and empower us to keep pursuing God’s peace. My prayer for each of us is that we would seek reconciliation with God and one another so that we can embody the peace of Christ. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/10-34.htm>

ⁱⁱ Maxie & Kimberly Dunnam. “The Workbook on the Beatitudes.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN, 2004. P. 188.

Additional Resources

Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 141-145.