

“The Gift of Peace”

Date: December 23, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Peace

Texts: Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 2:8-14

Occasion: Advent 4, Gifts that won't break series

One of the things I love about the Christmas season is the music. I love the music of Handel's Messiah. I love singing the beloved Christmas carols. I love singing the secular songs like “Jingle Bells,” “Winter Wonderland,” and “I'll be home for Christmas.”

A couple of decades ago, one of Lakewood's pastors used to end every worship service with the singing of this song, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” It's the song we're going to sing after the sermon today. And while it is not exclusively a Christmas carol, it is a great Christmas hymn. It has a beautiful melody and even more beautiful life-lesson in it.

The words of that hymn are a big part of the Christmas message: God loves us and claims us as beloved children, and God wants us to live in the spirit of peaceful unity and harmony as sisters and brothers in God's family. In fact, God wants us to live each day in the spirit of peacemakers.

Look at those words again: “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Let it start with me. Let me live every day as a peacemaker – in other words, in the gracious spirit of Jesus Christ.

That's the way it works. Christmas is the dramatic reminder that Christ came into this world to redeem us and to bring peace to our troubled souls. Christmas has a great gift for us, if we will only accept it in faith: the gift of peace. Christmas offers us peace with God, peace with ourselves and peace with others.

Let's start by talking about peace with God. Jesus Christ came into this world to set us right with God. He came into the world to save us and to bring us back to God. It's what Christmas is all about.

James Moore relates a story told to him by a friend. Some years ago his friend had taken his five year old son Christmas shopping one Saturday morning. It was just a few days before Christmas and the department store was packed with shoppers. The father told his son to stay near him and not wander off, because he could get lost in the crowd.

After they had shopped together for a while, the father was buying something for his wife at one of the counters. When he completed the purchase, he looked back and his son was not there.

He frantically searched for his son. He called out to him and rushed through the crowd looking for him, with no success. He checked the candy counter and then the toy department. Surely his son would be there. But no, his son wasn't anywhere to be found.

Just as he was starting to panic, there was an announcement over the loudspeaker: "We have a lost boy here! If you have lost your little boy, please come to the service desk." He anxiously made his way to the desk, and sure enough, there was his lost child. It was a big reunion, with lots of hugs and words of love. They had been apart, but they had found each other again! They had been brought back together.

Now think about this. The two of them had been separated because the little boy had wandered off, and it was the person who spoke over the loudspeaker who got them back together again. That person served, in a sense, as a reconciler between a father and his little boy.

In the same sense, Christ came to this earth to help us get back together with God who made us and who loves us. God comes in the Christ child to seek and to save the lost. *That's* what Christmas is all about. *That's* the way we can have the peace of Christmas: to allow the Christ of Christmas to bring us back to the Father who loves us.

Second, Christmas offers us the gift of peace with ourselves.

More and more psychologists are telling us that we can't feel good about life and other people until we feel good about ourselves. They call it a "healthy self-esteem," which is simply another way of saying that we need to be right with ourselves.

There was a movie made about the famous golfer Bobby Jones called *Stroke of Genius*. I'm not a golfer, so I don't recognize this name. But Jones was quite the man, and he was quite the golfer. He won his first golf tournament at the age of six. By the time he was 12 he was the Georgia state golf champion, and in 1921, at age 19, he became the youngest member of the US Walker Cup Team when it journeyed to England.

Between 1923 and 1930, Jones won five UW amateur titles, four US Opens, three British Opens, and one British amateur title. In 1930 he achieved the Grand Slam of golf, winning all four golf tournaments in a single calendar year. Amazingly, Jones retired from golf at the young age of 28. He became a lawyer and in 1934 helped design the Augusta National Golf Club, where he founded the noted Master's Golf Tournament.

But with all of his incredible accomplishments as a golf champion, he may be even more well-known and respected for a tournament he didn't win. It was the US Open, and the movie, *Stroke of Genius*, depicts the scene powerfully. Jones hits his ball into the rough. As he stands over the ball for his second shot, his ball moves slightly.

No one else sees it, but Jones immediately tells an official that he caused his ball to move. The officials interview the other opponents, and not one saw him do anything to move the ball. The officials tell him, "Bobby, it's your call. Are you sure you caused that ball to move?"

Jones answers, "I know I did."

The lead official looks at him and says, "Son, you are to be congratulated!" To which Jones says, "Sir, that is like congratulating me for *not* robbing a bank. I don't know how else to play the game." It was a two-stroke penalty, and Bobby Jones lost that tournament by one stroke!

What he did that day prompted sportswriter O.B. Keeler to write these words: "Bobby Jones lost the US Open today by one stroke. In calling a penalty on himself, he demonstrated for all of us the highest ideals of sportsmanship and personal honor. I am prouder of him than if he had won." Bobby Jones said of his actions: "There are things finer than winning championships." Today, appropriately, the United States Golf Association's sportsmanship prize is named the Bobby Jones Award.

The world needs more of that today, don't you agree? Let me ask you something. Do you feel good about your life right now - about who you are? Not about whether you're winning in the game of life, or getting ahead of anyone else, but are you comfortable living in your own skin?

No matter how we feel, we can find peace with ourselves by welcoming the Prince of Peace into our hearts and lives. The only way we can be right with ourselves is to be made right by him.

Finally, Christmas offers us the gift of peace with others. James Moore tells about a friend of his, a woman in her 80's who is full of life. She has a very special Christmas headband that she wears. It has mistletoe above it on a spring. Whenever she wears it, she is under the mistletoe no matter where she goes. And she always gets lots of hugs and kisses and smiles.

Do you know where the custom of kissing under the mistletoe came from? It began with the druids in northern Europe. They believed mistletoe

had curative powers and could heal lots of things, including separation between people. So when two enemies happened to meet under an oak tree with mistletoe hanging above them, they took it as a sign from God that they should drop their weapons and be reconciled. They would set aside their animosities and embrace one another under the mistletoe.

When Christian missionaries moved into northern Europe, they saw this mistletoe custom as a perfect symbol for what happened at Christmas. Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to redeem us, and to bring us peace, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

He came to show us how to love one another. In a real sense, the Prince of Peace came to show us how to embrace one another, as the druids did, and live together in peace.

If you want to have a peace-full Christmas, go in the spirit of love and fix the broken relationships in your life. If you are alienated or estranged or cut off or at odds with any other person, go in the spirit of Christmas and make peace. Don't put it off any longer.

Drop your pride, your resentment, your grudges, and go make it right. With the help of God, go make peace today. Christmas offers us the gift of peace with others, but it's up to us to accept that gift. At Christmas, the Christ Child comes into the world as the Prince of peace. He brings the peace that passes understanding, and we are called to share it with others.

Hope. Love. Joy. And peace. These are the Christmas gifts that always fit, that never go out of style. These are the Christmas gifts wrapped in Heaven. These are the Christmas gifts that won't break. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break* by James W. Moore and Jacob Armstrong, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, pp. 83-91.