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Shalom! Shalom Aleichem! If we were approaching the Jewish Temple with Jesus, we would greet each other in that way. Can you repeat it after me? *"Shalom!"* *"Shalom Aleichem!"* It means: *"Peace! Peace be with you!"* or actually, since "shalom" means *"well-being"* (the wholeness of life, fullness of health, well-being), *"Shalom Aleichem!"* means *"Well-being be upon you!"* Muslims use almost the same greeting in their Arabic *"as-Salamu Alaykum!"* Jews and Jewish Christians say it in Hebrew: *"Shalom Aleichem!"* It is quite a blessing to wish for each other: that we will have peace in spirit and in body, making us able to live fully and well. *"Shalom Aleichem!"* The fullness of God's Life-giving Peace be upon you!

In recent years I have changed what I say to people as we get off the elevator to go separate ways. Instead of "have a good day," I say, *"May things go well for you today."* And they seem pleased to hear a blessing and not just the usual phrase. When I say it, I am reminded that good living doesn't just happen; we have to seek it. The fullness of Life, the *"shalom"* God wants for each us must be *pursued*.

That's what the Psalmist says. If you want to see good days, then do the things that make life good for everybody around you – *"keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."*

Those verses are quoted in the New Testament, too – in 1 Peter 3. After giving instructions for husbands and wives to treat each other with reverent respect, as partners receiving from God the gracious gift of life, Peter writes: [read 3:8-14]

*"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers [and sisters], be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, 'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.' Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.'"*

That's good counsel as we gear up for our culture's Halloween celebrations – *“Do not fear what they fear.”* Instead, seek peace – seek the well-being of life that overcomes evil with good and overcomes fear with love.

I remember an older lady leaving after church in my first pastorate. *“Your message today was right on target,”* she said. *“Love and peace – that's what it's all about.”* If she had been more my age, I thought, she might be a hippie. But she was right. Love and Peace – that is what it's all about. At camp we sing, *“Peace, peace, peace, peace, the gospel in a word is peace. Peace that passes all understanding, peace, peace, peace.”* Peace is basic to the Good News of Jesus. If you want to see good days, turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.

This is not a “Brethren” thing ... although the Brethren and Mennonites and Quakers have done a better job of emphasizing the New Testament teachings about peacemaking than some other Christians have. Hopefully, those who feel God's leading to not participate in war know they can find solid biblical counsel from us. And hopefully, those who find themselves enmeshed in combat will find guidance and prayer support from us as they seek to make peace as best they can under all circumstances. Christians around the world turn to us for our counsel as the historic peace churches. But it is not just a “peace church” thing, not a “Brethren” thing – peace is at the *heart* of the Gospel for everyone. As Victor said in our puppet skit, Jesus taught us that peacemakers will be known as God's children – the ones who carry the traits of God. And the New Testament tells us that the very purpose of Jesus was to make peace between us and God through his sacrifice on the cross. Colossians 1:19-20 says, *“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

It is more than peace between redeemed people and God; it is also God's intention to bring peace between peoples who have been enemies, the way that Jews and Gentiles were enemies in the Old Testament. We read in Ephesians 2:14-18, *“For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. [Jesus]*

*came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."*

Imagine if people who claim to be loyal to God would let Jesus put hostilities to death. We can hold each other accountable, we can restrain evil behavior without succumbing to the spirit of hostility. Even if others are hostile towards us. Romans 12:18 makes clear that others may choose to be mean-spirited and vengeful towards us, but that does not give us the freedom to respond in kind. *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends."* That's for God to do. Our task is to live at peace, to be peacemakers from our side, as best we can, even if others do not respond in kind.

1 Corinthians 7:15 says that this applies to our relationships with unbelievers as well, even in marriage. If one spouse is a believer and the other is not, the believer is not to give up, even if they are deserted by the unbeliever: *"God has called us to live in peace."* Who knows, Paul says, whether our continuing to live as a person of peace towards unbelievers might eventually win them over and save them.

And Hebrews 12:14-15 gives a very clear command: *"Make every effort to live in peace with all [people] and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."* (Hebrews 12:14-15)

The Bible is full of teachings about God's desire that we seek peace and pursue it. God wants us to experience *shalom* – the well-being and fullness of life that peace brings. It is not a "brethren" thing – it is a *godly* thing – it is a sign that the Spirit of the Lord is at work in us when our living shows the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It is not easy. Jesus' efforts to help people experience peace with God brought a violent response from the rulers of his day. Paul's efforts to help Christians experience peace between the Jewish and Gentile cultures brought serious conflict with various Christian leaders for a time as well. Peace comes by way of the cross. That is the message of the scriptures. Peace comes by way of the cross.

It is hard to give up our desire to force others to be peaceable towards us. I read this week the story of Clarence Jordan's concern for his daughter, who was being

mistreated at school. You may have heard of Clarence Jordan and his Cottonpatch version of the New Testament. He was a Black man who organized Koinonia Christian Farm in Georgia back in the 1940's to model how Blacks and Whites could work and worship together. (My niece worked there as a volunteer service worker; she was mostly interested in their organic farming methods.) At any rate, it was a lot easier for Clarence to deal with the prejudice and hatred that was flung his way than to deal with what came at his daughter. *"One day, Clarence's daughter came home from school in tears. He asked, 'Honey, what's wrong?'*

*She said, 'Oh, dad, a lot of the kids are mean, but there's this one boy named Bob Speck. Every time Bob sees me coming down the hallway, he comes up and knocks me down. He throws my books down the hallway. He says the ugliest words to me.'*

*Jordan said, 'Jan, you've got long fingernails. Why don't you scratch his eyes out?'*

*And she said, 'Well, I thought about that, but I heard you say in your sermon that Jesus said we're supposed to love our enemy, so I thought I shouldn't scratch his eyes out.'*

*He said, 'Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do: tomorrow I'll go to the school, and I'm going to ask Jesus to excuse me from being a Christian for about 15 minutes while I beat the daylights out of Bob Speck.'*

*But then Jan said, 'Daddy, you can't do that.'*

*He said, 'Why not?'*

*She said, 'You can't be excused from being a Christian for 15 minutes.'"*

[James Howell, *Servants, Misfits and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories*, Upper Room, 1999, pp. 25-30, 47-52; quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Oct. 25, 2009, p. 19]

Clarence Jordan also had quite a conversation with his brother one time. His brother was an attorney, later to become a state senator and a Georgia State Supreme Court justice. This was in the mid-1950's and Clarence was struggling with legal issues as the leader of an interracial community in segregated Georgia. The members of his community had been excommunicated from their Southern Baptist congregation on charges that they *"persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together."* Vandalism, cross-burning, beatings, bombings, economic boycott, and sniper shootings needed to be held accountable. So

Clarence turned to his brother Robert, an attorney, asking him to serve as legal representative for the interracial community.

*“Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.”*

*“We might lose everything, too, Bob.”*

*“It’s different for you.”*

*“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”*

*“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”*

*“Could that point by any chance be – the cross?”*

*“That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”*

*“Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.”*

*“Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”*

*“The question,” Clarence said, “is do you have a church?”*

[David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor*, Brazos Press, 2005, pp. 191-192; quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Oct. 25, 2009, p. 20.]

It is not a simple thing to *“seek peace and pursue it.”* In fact, it can be downright dangerous in this world to honestly try to make the “well-being” of God’s shalom possible for all of God’s Creation. Nevertheless, peace is what God wants us to pursue. The face of the Lord will turn against those who do evil; his ears will be attentive to the prayers of those who desire what is right (*“the righteous”*). Therefore, *“turn from evil and do good; ... seek peace and pursue it.”*

We are called, as we have said in the statement of purpose as a congregation, to be *“Partners in Peace Witness.”* Shalom! Shalom Aleichem! God’s Peace be upon you – a peace that is *not* just for you to enjoy between yourself and the Lord. No, it

is a peace that you are called to *make* with *everyone* you meet. For God gives us a ministry of reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5 says, as ambassadors for Christ, to bring salvation – the full peace of God – to everyone.

There is ever so much more that could be said! We live in a world that is filled with violence and evil. The scriptures warn against prophets who proclaim that there is peace when there really is no peace. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God declares that false prophets “*dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace*” (Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11). The prophet Isaiah tells about those who cannot know the way of peace because “*there is no justice in their paths. They have turned [their paths] into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace*” (Isaiah 59:8). “*There is no peace for the wicked!*” (Isaiah 48:22 and 57:21).

God’s Peace, God’s Shalom, the well-being of God’s Creation is not fully among us – not yet! That’s why, brothers and sisters in Christ, we *must* seek peace and pursue it!

*Shalom Aleichem!* – God’s Life-giving Peace be at work through you!

Hymn *Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me*