



August 1, 2010  
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## *God's Twitter: Wisdom Longing for Peace*

Proverbs 3: 13-18; John 17: 20-23

Let's begin our sermon time this morning by whomping up some pictures in our imaginations. Kids, you can do this, too. Ready? Okay, let's begin by getting a picture in our minds of God's people in the Holy Land—the place where all the Bible stories happened. Got some? What came to mind? Maybe something like this from a Bible story [pictures]. Or maybe what came to mind wasn't a picture of a Bible story—maybe it was some Jewish people in the Holy Lands today [pictures]. Let's do some more picturing in our minds; when you picture Jesus' followers in the Holy Land, what comes to mind? Maybe something like this (point to screen) [pictures]. Now, let's bring it into today: get a picture in your mind's eye of Jesus' followers in the Holy Lands today. Anything come to mind? What did the faces look like? Any of Jesus' followers there today look like Jews in your imaginations? Any look the way we think Moslems, or Palestinians, look?

As many of us know, of course, some of Jesus' disciples from what we lovingly call the Holy Lands have been arriving at SeaTac all this weekend, and most of them are here with us in worship this morning. Half of them are Israeli believers in Messiah Jesus and half of them are Palestinian Christians—and 100% of them followers of Jesus. Here are some of their pictures [pictures]. And, here are pictures of the kinds of places they live.

Now, stick with me for two more bits of picturing. When you picture the conflict in the Middle East—between Israelis and Palestinians—what pictures come to mind? When you picture the people who are affected by the conflict, caught up in it, drawn into it, suffering from it, what kinds of faces come to mind? Muslims and Jews? Probably. Christians? Probably not so much, if at all. This morning, though, we know for certain that there are Christians caught up in the conflict in the Middle East—people who are our brothers and sisters in Jesus. In general, they don't worship the way we're used to worshipping, for many of them English is not their first language, and they experience the world and the conflict in the Middle East so differently from us that we can hardly imagine it. But, we all have this in common with them: Jesus came, lived, died and was raised for all of us, and we will all be together in heaven for eternity, and that's a very, very long time.

Here's something important for us to grapple with for a bit. For many evangelical American Christians the Middle East tends to bring to mind prophecy, the end times and the second coming of Jesus more than anything else at all. But for most of the people caught up in that dread conflict, prophecies and the end times are not what they think most about, not even as Christians, and not even when they are trying to think about that conflict biblically. For the Christians in the Holy Land—in Israel, the West Bank, Palestine—and for their millions of Jewish and Moslems neighbors, what life is mostly about is raising their children, worshipping God as they want to, going to work and making a living, shopping for food and clothing, getting medical care, maintaining a sense of their cultural heritage and identity,

living pleasantly with their friends and neighbors, and engaging in what our American Declaration of Independence called “the pursuit of happiness.” Most of that sounds like what most of us are trying to do with our own lives and families, doesn’t it? But we know there are differences between their lives and ours that matter: they are doing everything we do in the midst of a serious conflict rooted in deep religious and cultural convictions; one that has been going on for 100 years, has taken the life of someone they knew and loved and could take their own lives without warning; a conflict in which their home and their very homeland is at risk; a conflict that has most of the world and its powers literally up in arms—including the United States—and nearly all of those powers care less about Palestinians and Israelis than they do about what they have to gain or lose in the conflict. A tough way to live.

So, why are they here among us, these young adults? Well, they were invited—and we have been invited—to try to bridge the gaps that divide them from one another. Part of why they are here is that it is not easy for them to meet safely in their own lands—there are too many risks that people they love and care about will misunderstand why they would be talking to people others see only as enemies. And, part of why they are here is that it is good for us as their sisters and brothers in Christ to share in their struggle a little bit, to be part of their conversation, to share their journey of seeking Jesus’ will, being obedient to his calling. They are doing this, we are doing this, because we don’t exactly have a choice: we will either live our lives however we please and love the people we love and hate the ones everyone else we know hates . . . or we will be part of answering Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper that his disciples would be one.

We often think about Jesus’ answering our prayers. But we have a part in being the answer to at least one of Jesus’ prayers: his prayer that his followers would be one. One as he and the Father are one—think of that. That would take a miracle—how could any two believers be one as Jesus and the Father are one? How could even two Christians who really, REALLY loved each other be one the Jesus and his Father are one? It would take a miracle—and it would be an even bigger miracle if Christians from two cultures that have been at war for 60 years could become one the way Jesus and the Father are one. But, Jesus has done that miracle: in his body he has made us one: his body born in Bethlehem, laid in the manger; his body on the cross, his body risen and glorified, his body at the right hand of the Father, the body in which he will come again on that Day—in that body, Jesus has made us all one, like it not. And the only question for us is whether we’ll live into the reality Jesus has created in his own body, or whether we will live into some reality that we create and give our bodies to.

I know, that’s lots of fancy theological talk, and we don’t see much objective evidence of it—quite the opposite, actually. Maybe it’s just pie in the sky bye and bye, the kind of wistful spiritual crud pastors say in church that everyone knows is just trash in the real world of tanks and suicide bombs, the Jewish experience of the holocaust and the Palestinian experience of *al-nakba* (their name for the loss of their ancestral homelands to Israelis); a world that includes both longing for safety and the fear of random violence on both sides of the conflict. I mean, closer to home, there is lots and lots that divides Christians in this nation—and no one’s life or property or wealth is even at stake: Protestants and Catholics have their doubts about the salvation of each other, and most of us don’t even seem to know that the Orthodox exist!

So, if we don't believe in the miracle of oneness among Jesus' followers, if we don't believe Jesus' prayer has any meaningful answer in this world . . . just what *do* we believe in? What shall we bet our lives on? What shall we give ourselves away for? What's worth risking and dying for? Maybe Jesus who prayed that we would all be one as he and the Father are one didn't really mean it literally, exactly—maybe it was just kind of a metaphor. Or maybe he was just as big a spiritual dreamer and idiot as preachers sometimes seem to be. But maybe, of course, Jesus meant it. Maybe the Lord for whom, by whom the world was created knew what he was praying about; maybe his prayer is better than our prayers and longings. What *do* you long for? Really: in the Middle East, what do you long for? For the side you like to win? For the side you don't like so well to get what it's got coming to it? Or just for the battle of Armageddon to start and Jesus to catch you up in the rapture and not leave you behind when the end comes? Is that all there is: winning, vengeance, longing for the end to come?

Jesus said, "Take up your cross daily and follow me" because there are some things that are worse than dying, some things that can only be had by risking death and loss, and some things that are worth suffering for. You buying that? Would you bet your life on it? Or maybe just give up several weeks of your life to see what Jesus would do if you gave him a chance to do something about it?

Some people are here with us who have made a bet on Jesus and his prayer. They are taking risks. Some very conservative Palestinian parents put their young women and men on airplanes—young people who have lived very protected/sheltered lives and who have never traveled outside their homeland or been in public without a chaperon—and allowed them to come to a nation known throughout their culture for its looseness and sinfulness. (You do know that's the way one third of the world sees us, don't you? They know us from our movies.) Some young adults from Israel are here who already have reason to worry about what their neighbors think of them because they are Messianic Christians instead of practicing Jews; risking being viewed as something less than true and loyal citizens of Israel, and are risking their future economic security. Golly Christians are a crazy bunch! Risking all that for *what??* Does anyone really think that these few days, and these few precious followers of Jesus, will bring peace to the Middle East?

No. I don't think that. I hope no one does. But I do know that Jesus is at work through his disciples whenever they follow him and submit to him and participate with him in what he is doing. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and he is at work all the time to break down the walls of hostility that separate humans and make them fight and hurt and destroy each other. Jesus is praying for oneness, at least among those who bear his name—including in Israel and Palestine. And these young followers of Jesus are here because he has asked them to be here—they have followed him here. What happens while they are here depends mostly on Jesus—not them—Jesus and their willingness to be part what he is doing; their willingness to share in Jesus' suffering so that his people would be one as he and the Father are one; their willingness to do what Jesus wants them to do instead of what everyone else is doing and instead of what everyone else expects them to do. In the end, beloved, this isn't about them (this isn't about you, dear SSE sisters and brothers from Israel and Palestine and the USA), this is about Jesus.

So, what are the longings of our hearts for the participants in the Sound and Sand Encounter? What are the longings of our hearts for Christians separated by the conflict in the Middle East—Palestinian Christians and Jewish Christians?

Let's take some time, here at the Lord's Table, to let the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with the longing of Jesus' heart. I'm going to read Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper again, and then follow it with other readings from the New Testament about the oneness of those who belong to Jesus now and for eternity. Please just listen, and let the words wash over you. Please listen prayerfully . . . longingly. If you are comfortable and willing to do so, I invite you to put as much of your body as you can into an attitude of prayer, submission and longing. Maybe you'll open your hands, or maybe put your hands together in the traditional attitude of prayer, or stretch them up to God, or maybe cross your arms over your heart. And, maybe you'll bow your body as low as you can in prayer, or kneel, as I read the passages.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us pray your prayer for oneness among your people. Holy One, fill our hearts with longing for peace among Jesus' people and in the Middle East.

Read John 17: 20-26, selections  
Ephesians 2: 11-19.  
Ephesians 4: 1-6  
Philippians 2: 1-11

**Sermon Discussion Questions** - Have someone read John 17: 20-26 out loud.

### **SOME TIME TO REFLECT INDIVIDUALLY**

Take some time to reflect individually on the following questions—jot down some of your thoughts, listen a bit to the Lord as you do (and certainly before you begin talking!).

- What are some of the things that divide Christians from each other? What makes us push away from each other, not trust each other, or split into different churches and factions?
- Are there any reasons for dividing that Jesus would approve? If so, what?
- What is it that makes Christians one?
- Why did Jesus say he wanted Christians to be one?
- What Christians we do to be one in Jesus—to answer Jesus' prayer?
- What can we do at Chapel Hill to be more one in Christ?

### **REFLECTING TOGETHER**

Share some of your reflections with one another.

### **PRAY**

Spend some time praying for our unity in Christ at Chapel Hill, for the unity of the church in the world, and for unity among Christians in Palestine and Israel.