

Message: Is Your Heart at Peace?

“Do you have a heart at war or a heart at peace?”¹

That’s a question that our Bishop, Rev. Grant Hagiya, recently asked in the magazine *Ministry Matters*. It’s a good question for us to ask on World Communion Sunday, when we gather together as Christ’s body, the church on earth. It’s not an intellectual exercise. I’m not engaging in philosophical debate. Bishop Hagiya’s question goes right to our attitude, our core beliefs and the way we live. It’s a question about our identity: who we are as disciples of Jesus, the Christ.

We’re living in a time of great conflict. Our world, nation and city are divided. The “haves” and the “have nots” are further apart now than any time most of us can remember. We’re certainly divided politically. We’re divided economically. We’re divided socially. From Black Lives Matter to #MeToo and on, we’re reminded that racial and gender and sexual inequality still exists. The world is a dangerous place.

The fear, anxiety and uncertainty of this era are a call to those who follow Jesus. We’re called to action. Moses’ words to people who knew bondage all their lives speaks to us, “*Be strong and of good courage*” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Strength and courage. They’re good to have. We give them a name: virtues. They go together. It takes inner strength to have courage. You see, we don’t have courage when we ignore or suppress our fears. We have courage when we act with full awareness of our emotions, the situation we’re in and the impact it could have. Courage is when we rely on our faith and have the inner strength to take action, even in the face of overwhelming odds. If God shows you one step – take it!!

Courage is doing what’s right, even when everyone and everything tells us to quit and walk away. It’s what fuels grit. James sees it as a blessing: “... *think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. ... the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing*” (James 1:2-4, CEB).

¹ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9169/a-heart-at-peace>

You're probably wondering, "Why is he talking about this?"

Good question. I'm talking about courage because I believe we need courage to live as followers of Jesus today. If we really, truly follow Jesus, then we have to have the courage to live it like we mean it. That means a lot.

I'm focusing on our Bishop's question: "Do you have a heart at war or a heart at peace?"² When we're facing conflict, either personal or global, we have a choice. How will we resolve the conflict? We can either choose to fight or we can choose to seek peace. These are the two ways of being. What we choose has a life-changing impact.

If we have a heart at peace, we see others as people with hopes, needs, cares and fears that are as real to them as ours are to us.

We treat them with the love and compassion that we yearn to receive from others. With a heart of peace, we know where we stand. With a heart of "convicted humility," we're open to explore all sides of an issue. We're open to where God is leading us. Our actions are curious and open-minded. Our hearts are open. Our doors are open. We're willing to say, "I might be wrong about this." This takes courage.

If we have a heart at war, we see others as objects. They're tools to be used, obstacles to our goals or even irrelevant. They're alien or marginal. With a heart at war, we often cannot see the other person's point of view, and we sometimes behave in ways that provoke hurtful acts. We can become the monsters we're fighting against. Peer pressure may lead us to justify our negative attitudes and actions by seeing others as worse than they really are. We aren't willing to compromise or listen to anything contrary to our beliefs or position. Our actions are to defend, protect and conquer. A heart at war means our soul is restless and unsettled. We aggressively seek to enforce our beliefs.

I'm not here to point a finger of blame. Many of us have been taught to defend ourselves, to fight for our positions. We've been taught that we can't make any concessions that would affect our point of view. We've armed ourselves with Scriptures, theology and politics.

² *Ibid*

Sadly, I’m not the only one who was raised this way. The irony of it is this: we aren’t a military. We aren’t a for-profit corporation. We aren’t a political party. Our mission isn’t winning, overpowering and conquering the competition.

Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*” (Matthew 5:9, NRSV). Peacemaking is intended to be part of our DNA as Jesus’ disciples. Jesus didn’t come to lead an army. He came to change the world through the power of love and grace and forgiveness. I don’t know about you, but that gives me hope.

That’s what it means to be part of the church of Jesus, the Christ.

Our purpose is to love God and our neighbor the same way we love ourselves. Our goal is not to win but to sacrifice, not to overpower but to love, not to conquer but to show compassion, not to lecture but to listen. We need to learn to have a heart at peace, not at war. It won’t be easy. It will take courage. It will take sacrifice.

Jesus said, “*I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit*” (John 12:24).

It’s hard to die to yourself. It feels like we’re giving up, like we’re losing. Opening ourselves to new ways of thinking and feeling leads to doubt, uncertainty, to things we don’t like. But it’s the only way to grow - spiritually, mentally and emotionally. It’s the only way to move from a position of judgment and blame to a higher purpose, the purpose of Jesus, which is to love and restore. That connects us, bridging divides.

Jesus shows us the way. On his last night, when he knew what was waiting for him, he prayed, “*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me*” (Luke 22:42a). Jesus didn’t want to die. Who would? Yet his very next words show Jesus’ heart, “*yet, not my will but yours be done*” (v42b). Jesus understood that he had to put his desires, hopes and dreams aside. He had to die to himself – surrendering his will to God.

Just in case you think it was an easy decision, the next verse tells us, “*Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great*

drops of blood falling down on the ground” (vv43-44). Even after the decision was made, Jesus knew the uncertainty and agony of the moment.

Did you hear it? God gives us inner strength when we, too, surrender our will to him. Today, as we celebrate with the church universal our common bond with God, let’s make a promise: let’s learn to be peacemakers, true children of God. Let’s teach our children to have hearts at peace.

If we’re truly committed to peacemaking - not just proving ourselves right, then let’s step outside the lines. Let’s avoid the attitudes and actions that demonize others and work for a heart that is at peace. Let’s build relationships – with people of influence and with those we’ve treated as enemies. Let’s listen and learn from those with whom we’re fighting. Let’s pray for everyone to be able to talk and to share our human experience with one another. Then we can find a better place to deal with things when they go wrong and work together to make things go right.

Jesus took the last step. He made the ultimate sacrifice – with love. Then God showed us a new way, a way of peace. That way leads through an empty tomb. Hope and new life wait for us on the other side of death. I pray that each of us will commit ourselves to Jesus’ way.
It’s the way to truth and life and peace.

Let us pray ...

Lord, you are the source of light and life. Forgive us when we take positions and go to battle with others in our church, with family members, with our neighbors, with those in our community and nation, with those who are enemies. Give us a new heart and a new attitude. Take the sword from our hand and give us an olive branch. Change our hard hearts to hearts that are loving and at peace. Show us a new way to live. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Psalm 37:37-40

Observe those who have integrity
and watch those whose heart is right
because the future belongs to persons of peace.

But wrongdoers will be destroyed all together;
the future of the wicked will be cut short.

The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their refuge in times of trouble.

The LORD will help them and rescue them -
rescue them from the wicked - and he will save them
because they have taken refuge in him.

Philippians 4:4-9 (CEB)

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.