

Sprouting Peace

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
June 17, 2018—Vacation Bible School Week

- Isaiah 58:9-12 (Good News Translation) ⁹When you pray, I will answer you. When you call to me, I will respond. “If you put an end to oppression, to every gesture of contempt, and to every evil word; ¹⁰if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon. ¹¹And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things. I will keep you strong and well. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water, like a spring of water that never goes dry. ¹²Your people will rebuild what has long been in ruins, building again on the old foundations. You will be known as the people who rebuilt the walls, who restored the ruined houses.”
- Matthew 5:9 (New Revised Standard Version) ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Striving to be peacemakers in our world, we will be seen as children of God.

Braden Baker is an 11-year-old boy in Texas born with a 75% hearing loss. Consequently he wears two hearing aids. Well, he did until his dog ate them. Really. The dog—appropriately named “Chewy”—ate both of Braden’s hearing aids. Actually, Chewy did it twice—the second time, the hearing aids were still under warranty so that didn’t cost his family anything. But after the first set of hearing aids experienced a “Chew-tastrophe,” his parents had a serious discussion with Braden. They wanted him to understand that *they* were fortunate enough to be able to afford to replace his hearing aids. But they pointed out that many other people wouldn’t have the means to replace hearing aids that got lost or damaged ... and that some people who need hearing aids aren’t able to afford them at all.

That got Braden to thinking... and then acting. Last year, with the help of his mom, he set up a GoFundMe account with the goal of raising \$1,000 for the Oticon Hearing Foundation—that foundation focuses on helping people with hearing loss. Before too long Braden had to raise his goal from \$1,000 to \$3,000 because of the great response. Late last year Braden appeared on TV’s “Ellen” show by which time he had already raised \$23,000... and on her show he received a gift of another \$20,000. As of last week Braden had raised just shy of \$100,000 to provide hearing aids to children and adults both in this country and abroad.¹

In Vacation Bible School this week the children learned that because of what Braden tried to do, he should be called a peacemaker because peacemakers find ways to help others, and that’s certainly what young Braden is doing.

Peacemakers speak up when someone’s being treated unfairly or unkindly. There are examples in the news right now. On yesterday’s broadcast of National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition, the archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Miami Thomas Wenski was asked why the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops went on record to call “immoral” our government’s current practice of separating children from their parents as they try to cross the border without documentation. Bishop Wenski explained, “...It goes against the values of our nation and the values of helping families stay together.”²

And two dozen leaders of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious groups in our country—including the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—co-signed an open letter criticizing this family-rending practice. The letter includes the statement, “We affirm the family as a foundational societal structure to support human community and understand the household as an estate blessed by God. The security of the family provides critical mental, physical and emotional support to the development and wellbeing of children.”³

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuKqMoWHt54>, accessed 6/13/2018

² <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/16/620611526/religious-groups-criticize-trump-immigration-policies>, accessed 6/17/2018

³ ELCA presiding bishop, faith leaders issue statement on family separation, <http://elca.org/News-and-Events/7935>, accessed 6/17/2018

Peacemakers help people, they speak up when someone's being treated unkindly or unfairly, and peacemakers also help people resolve problems—whether those are problems between people or problems they're having in life. The Vacation Bible School children learned about some peacemakers right here in our community—peacemakers because they try to solve the problem of poor nutrition and they try to help people who have trouble affording enough food.

We look for a different mission project for children to learn about and support for Vacation Bible School each year. We try to alternate between international projects and projects in our country. This year we chose a very local project: River Sprouts.

It was the idea of a fourth-grader at Kensington Intermediate School three years ago. Samantha recognized that she has a strong family and a good life, and she also recognized that some people face many challenges in their daily lives, including the challenge just to have enough to eat. So Samantha and some of her friends launched what is now called "River Sprouts." The goal of their non-profit organization is to grow healthy food and give it to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, crisis nurseries, and others who need it. They've worked with local civic leaders and community philanthropists and enlisted the help of many professionals so they can build a greenhouse at the city's community garden. That's where River Sprouts will engage others also in being peacemakers by growing fresh vegetables year 'round for people who wouldn't get them otherwise.

One of the most beloved sayings of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5:9 where Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God." Let me talk about children for a moment. Many of you know that Mary and I became grandparents about eight months ago. I'm trying to limit my mentions of our infant grandson Rhys to no more than two sermons per month, and I think this will fill the quota for this month. When people say the magic word "grandson" and I pull out my phone to show them a photograph, invariably I'll hear them say something like, "Rhys has his mother's eyes" or "his mouth and chin look like yours," and things like that. In the child you see things that remind you of the parents. Perhaps that's what Jesus meant when he said "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."

Here's what I mean: when we are engaged in making peace—when we are helping others or speaking out or working to resolve problems people are having—when we are trying to be peacemakers, we remind people of God. Our actions and our attitudes are showing godly characteristics like patience, generosity, acceptance, courage, understanding, hope, determination, unconditional love. People witness those actions and attitudes in us, and they think, "There's a family resemblance there to someone... oh! I see their father in them—their Heavenly Father." When we try to be peacemakers in our lives, people are more likely to recognize us as children of God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God," Jesus said.

In about a week five high schoolers from this church will engage in peacemaking, even if they hadn't thought of it in those terms. This year our mission trip will take us near Cincinnati to Hamilton, Ohio—I think it got its name from the smash-hit Broadway musical...! There for a week we'll join with hundreds of young people from several states gathered for a work camp. We'll be divided into crews of five to eight people and assigned to provide home repairs for senior citizens and impoverished families in the Hamilton area. Not only will we paint and saw and hammer and drill, but from experience I know that the kids will find other ways to be peacemakers: providing help to homeowners, speaking out if some of their fellow work campers ever get a little out of line, resolving problems that may arise among campers or with our homeowner hosts. Through this mission trip the people of Hamilton, Ohio will see hundreds of kids as children of God because by their speech and action and spirit people will see God shining through those kids.

There's not a one of us here who doesn't have the opportunity or the ability to be a peacemaker... and we don't have to go off on a mission trip to do it, either. Guided by the example of Jesus, encouraged by the words of Jesus, we can help others, speak out for what is right, and be a friend to someone who really needs a friend. As we bring the blessing of peace to strangers, neighbors, even one another—as we strive to be peacemakers in our lives—we will be known as children of God.