

“For What Are We Chosen?”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
May 18, 2014

The named title of the sermon today, and what I have written in newsprint, is “For What Are We Chosen?” I am going to explore some concepts and ideas as a kind of a “dip the toe in the water” answer to the question “For what are we chosen?” as people of faith in this day and time.

I want to begin this discussion by reading the introductory words from a 1990 book by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon were, and continue to be, Professors of Theology at Duke University. That’s a “small” school here in N. C. Both are well respected and Willimon was the Chaplain there at Duke for many, many years. This is probably one of their most provocative books. You know it’s a good book when people both love it and hate it at the same time.

I want to read the opening page of their book and see if you relate:

“Sometime between 1960 and 1980 an old, inadequately-conceived world ended and a fresh, new world began. We do not mean to be overly dramatic. Although there are many who have not yet heard the news, it is, nevertheless, true. A tired old world has ended and an exciting new one is awaiting recognition. This book is about a renewed sense of what it means to be Christian, more precisely of what it means to be pastors who care for Christians in a distinctly changed world. When and how did we change? Although it may sound trivial, one of us is tempted to date the shift sometime on a Sunday evening in 1963. Then, in Greenville, S. C., in defiance of the state’s time-honored Blue Laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday. Seven of us regular attendees of the Methodist youth fellowship at Buncombe Street Church, made a pact to enter the front door of the church with our youth group, be seen by the leaders, and then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox Theater. That evening has come to represent a watershed in the history of Christian-dom, South Carolina style. On that night, Greenville, S. C., the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the western world, served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church and no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young and that night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.”

So, Hauerwas and Willimon, in this book called *Residents Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, have been making the case for almost 30 years that the world out there really no longer props up the church or supports any of the values of the Christian church any longer. They acknowledge that there was, in fact, a day when the American culture and the culture of the church worked together in some profound ways. It was not perfect, of course, but it was civil. At least some would argue that. Hauerwas and Willimon argue that that time is long since over and the church has not recognized that.

Many of our churches are still sort of shaped and molded by that 1963 world, and we wonder what is going on? Where have our youth gone? What is our culture all about? What is the church to be about in this new world? I think that is, in fact, what the church struggles with and has been struggling with for quite some time. Who are we and what are we to do as chosen people by God in the midst of a culture which no longer lifts up or supports much of anything that we do or believe in the church? If we are not America’s church supporting America’s agenda or values, what and who are we?

So, I think that is very much where Peace United Church of Christ is. There are many, many churches that are there with us and have been there with us over the years and how we react to this question and this reality and how we revitalize our ministry and revitalize our “chosen-ness” is critical.

Being a “chosen people” has a hint of exclusivity to it which makes some of us uncomfortable, but I encourage us to think about it in a positive light that God has actually chosen us to do something very special in the world at this very moment. To me that is exciting. God has chosen us to do something very important at this very moment, and I sense that Peace Church needs to grapple with these questions. I am grappling with these questions. How do we turn the church around so that it is a vital force in a culture that is no longer paying attention to the church? So I want to explore some ideas around that question “For what are we chosen?”.

Before I present my ideas, I want to contextualize this as simply a “dipping of the toe into the water”. My hope is that, coming out of this sermon and these ideas, that we will then begin, as a congregation, to explore these concepts much more intentionally, much more deeply and, at some point, perhaps find a way to embrace these concepts so that it will be our congregational purpose, so this will be the beginning of a discussion, not the end of the discussion.

For What Are We Chosen?

My sense is that, in this sleek new age of technology, we need a snappy little tagline for our ministry. Here’s my suggestion: “Mission PC3”. Don’t you love that—“Mission PC3”? It doesn’t mean “politically correct”. I just wanted you to know that. What it does mean is that Peace United Church of Christ has the best name ever given to a church--Peace Church! I have, since the beginning of considering my ministry here, thought “Man, what a great name for a church. What if we actually embodied our name? What if our ministry actually embodied our name?”

The “P” stands for “Peace”. “C3” stands for where we work for Peace—Peace in our Congregation, in our Community and in Creation. So, “PC3” means Peace in our Congregation, in our Community, and in Creation. These would be the three primary focal points for our mission, and our mission would be working for peace, that is, shalom and well-being in our congregation, in our wider community, and in God’s creation. Now, what does that look like? I want to stress again that this is just dipping our toes in the water. We, as a congregation, will need to do a lot of intentional talking about this, in regard to what this will actually look like. I hope it might lead to a retreat or something like that—some kind of formal way for us to engage with these ideas, but here’s what it might look like.

Peace in our congregation. How do we get to be Shalom people? Well, we work on spiritual development. We work on prayer. We have prayer groups. We engage in silence. We engage in spiritual disciplines that help us to grow in our spirituality. There is a plethora of spiritual exercises that we can engage in as a congregation and offer programming and groups to help in our spiritual development, so we find peace in our congregation by, as individuals, becoming spiritually grounded, by becoming people who are at peace.

Secondly, *we work towards peace in our congregation by working on our biblical understanding*, by working more and more intentionally on understanding the scriptures, understanding what the scriptures have to say to us in our time. In the United Church of Christ we love to say that ‘God is still speaking.’ “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” These are all catch phrases that mean that the Bible is alive and well and still speaking to our lives in this day-and-time. Most research indicates (and I don’t know if it holds for all of us here) that mainline Protestant Christians are woefully inadequate in their biblical understandings, and we need to work on that. We need to begin to grow in our understanding of both the Old and New Testaments and what these old, ancient words have to say to our contemporary reality. The Bible is tremendously helpful and powerful when we understand it and what it has to say for our world today.

Finding peace in our congregation is about becoming spiritually grounded, growing in our faith, and growing in our understanding that as Christians our life narrative is the biblical narrative. We are a Christian church. Biblical understanding is going to be very important for our growth and our peace.

Last, but not least, when it comes to peace in our congregation, there is polity and structural Shalom. How do we, as a congregation, in the way we organize ourselves, in the way we do our business—how do we do it in such a way that it provokes peace—peace within the pews, peace among

members, peace with our Consistory, peace with the decisions that we make? The church should be a model for peaceful discussion, discernment, and decision making, so we, as part of our ministry, embody for the world a peaceful way of structuring ourselves and making decisions. This is a way of saying that our decisions and our energies will not be acted out in parking lot conversations (which all churches are very good at), but that we will be an honest community, talking to one another frankly about what is important and the decisions that we make. So, that's how I see peace in our congregation—spiritual development, deeper biblical understanding, and a Shalom process of making decisions and living together as a community of faith.

In our wider community, how do we claim a mission of peace? In our community, we as a church, from a prophetic point of view, are to advocate for *social righteousness*. We want, and we seek out, a social order that is just and filled with righteousness, meaning good moral orientation in our social sphere. That is clearly a mission for our church, speaking from a prophetic point of view, also from a gospel point of view. Working towards social righteousness: a healthy, moral orientation for our community. This is part of what we are called to be and to do.

Secondly, in our community, the mission of the church has always been to heal the divisions that are out there in the world. How do we heal the walls between us and other faith communities? How do we strengthen relationships with other Christians and people of other faith traditions? How do we work towards peace and reconciliation among groups that are always living in tension? Part of our mission of peace-making is the healing of divisions in our world, and there are plenty of divisions to heal, so where we place our efforts will take some discernment. What divisions in our wider community do we, as a congregation, want to focus on?

Next is promoting a community peace by being a congregation of hospitality and invitation. That is, we are not just here alone and self-focused, but we are constantly inviting our community in, finding new and powerful ways to have our neighbors be a part of us. It is called evangelism. This is about being a friendly presence in our community. It is about our Spring Carnival. It is about lots of things that we already do and new initiatives that we need to make—being a community of hospitality and invitation to those who are outside of the church. That is part of the way that we work to build peace in our community.

Next is peace in God's creation. This is not just a reference to the created order of the environment, although that is very much a part of it, but it is being an advocate for peaceful relationships in all of God's creation among all of God's creatures, both human and animal. For instance, one thing we are already doing involves our global mission children. We are working to help be a peaceful community that is working with children in other lands. That is just one example of being for peace in the creation. Now the way I lined this out is being for peace in creation involves engagement with creation so we engage with people from other lands like with our children, or engagement with God's natural created order. Next Saturday, when we are canoeing and kayaking around, that is one way of being engaged with God's created order. Also, we are to be involved in the healing of creation. Again, this is the environment, God's natural created order, and it is also healing of broken humanity. How can we be a part of healing of God's creation? Remember that we, as males and females, are a part of God's creation.

Last, but not least, is advocating for God's creation, so we promote the peace of creation by engaging with creation, healing of creation and advocating for creation, for the people and the natural environmental order.

So, I put this into the water here to help us, just as a beginning shot, to begin to think about, as a chosen people in this new reality of a "Christian-dom" that died in 1963 in Greenville, S. C., we live in a new world, and how does the church reinvent itself, how does the church witness to this new world. Those are some of the questions we need to struggle with.

I want to end by saying to Peace United Church of Christ (Matthew 5:9 is from the Sermon on the

Mount. It is part of The Beatitudes): “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”.

When Jesus was here on earth in that first century, in all the reading that I have done about that first century, the Roman Empire, and all the stuff that was going on then, I think I can make an honest assessment and say that things in that first century were rough. There were all kinds of social problems, all kinds of injustices, all kinds of suffering, and at that moment God sends his son, Jesus Christ, to bring good news. Gospel, as we know, means good news. Jesus starts to talk about how this world should be different. Jesus begins to talk about how the kingdom of God looks, and begins to live it.

Church is a group of people who are called and chosen by God to imagine a different world, and that is the challenge before us as Peace Church. How can we imagine a new world? I believe that is our call and perhaps in this model laid out here, as a beginning point for dialogue we can go forward and be about imagining and creating a new world. So, I invite all of you to begin to think about and to look forward to future moments of dialogue, congregational talking, and struggling with what is God’s call to us as God’s chosen people. That will be exciting, difficult work and will be exactly what we are called to do. I look forward to future conversations about all of this and about where we, as a church, as Peace United Church of Christ, are being called to go. Thanks be to God. Amen.