

**“Besides Those Already Gathered”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
August 17, 2014**

Well, I probably don't have to say to you this morning that the passage from Matthew is startling, to say the least, because that Canaanite woman calls Jesus to account, and he is tempted in the beginning to shoo her away. Based on that scripture, I had planned just a powerful and life-transforming sermon that was going to “blow your minds away”, but I never got to it. I never got to it because life gets in the way sometimes of our plans.

Sometimes we have things that we want to do on our agenda and God will laugh in our faces, so God gave me a sermon this morning. He gave it to me when I went over to Iris' (Haislip) house a little after 9:00 on Friday morning. I was just coming into work and wanted to drop by and see how Ray was doing. When I got out of the car and into the driveway, there was Iris' daughter on the stairs weeping on the front porch. When I saw her, I knew how Ray was doing. She said “My dad just died a little while ago,” so I went into the home and called out for Iris. I couldn't see her at first. She was in a back room but she came out. She said, “He just died a few moments ago”. The woman from Hospice was there. She had just finished cleaning him up. Ray, his body, was still there, lying in the bed in the living room. Ray looked like a dead man. His mouth was open. His eyes were still open, but there was no life in his body. So, we talked, and we gathered the family together and had a prayer around his body, then we talked a little more and we started to make plans. It was a room that was filled with death. Death hung in the air. Death was right there in the bed. An ending had obviously just come. It is an odd moment. It is a moment that is a great opportunity for it to be just a moment of despair, sadness and loss, as it clearly was for the family.

Iris' two daughters were there and her son, Ray, Jr., was there also. Ray came out a little later in our conversation, and he had an announcement to make. He said “I just learned that my daughter just gave birth to my first grandson”. Iris was a great-grandmother right there in that room of death. It was a clarifying moment. Death is not the last word.

We are all engaged in this cycle of life that never ends, and sometimes we get caught up in the spirit of death that surrounds us at times. We can become very glum. We can become very discouraged. We can become cynical, and we can lose our zest for life.

What a great moment when a new life has come into the world at a moment when another life has left. It is a reminder for me that the church is not about Good Friday, when Jesus died on the cross. It is about Easter Sunday—always about Easter Sunday. We should never get stuck on Good Friday. We should always be living and pointing towards Easter morning every day of our lives because that is where the hope is. That is where we get our energy for mission, and that is what the church is to be all about.

I have been thinking a lot about our Palm Sunday plants in the windows. Palm Sunday, of course, is the entrance sign into Jerusalem for Jesus which is the beginning of the weekend that begins with death, but look at our Palm Sunday plants. They are bursting with life. I think those plants are symbolic, and perhaps are even a message from God to remember what we are about. “I am with you”. Remember, Peace Church, what you are called to be and to do. I see those plants as hope. I see everything that we are doing as hope and faithfulness. As we lose some members to death, we take on new members for life.

I know that Peace Church is going through a lot of changes right now. It is not just members dying and new members coming in. It is things that have long been instituting our changes in this church, and it is changing because it has to change. It has to, and I know, and I recognize and experience,

too, that change is very hard. It is hard for us to change. It is hard for many of you, it is hard for me, but it is necessary, and we are doing it.

Think about what is going to happen this week in the life of Peace Church:

Monday through Friday, out in our parking lot, is Mobile Meals. Peace Church, through its support of Mobile Meals and its participation in Mobile Meals, feeds the hungry and reaches out to the lonely.

Monday through Friday at Peace Church, Narcotics Anonymous meets in our building. Yesterday we had an anniversary of 25 years of Genesis II, a Narcotics Anonymous group that meets in our Fellowship Hall. Through our support of Narcotics Anonymous, Peace Church heals the sick.

Beginning tomorrow at 9:30, we will be welcoming immigrants and refugees. We will be welcoming those who have fled from their lands—from their homelands—under war conditions, disaster conditions, and all kinds of conditions that most of us have never experienced. Peace Church is saying “You are welcome here”.

It is not just that we allow people to use our building. It is that we, as a church, live out the gospel by being open. That, of course, is not all that we do. We do wonderful things all the time. It is a special moment in the life of our church, and it is a difficult one. We are affirming life. Life gets the last word. So, it is a joyous moment—new members, new people, new groups, new things happening, and God is with us. I am excited about what is happening, and I am excited about our Peace Church congregation.

One last story:

Lynn Thompson, one of the leaders of the New Arrivals Institute, was here a couple of Sundays ago. She became an Orthodox Christian a number of years ago. She told her priest recently about how the New Arrivals Institute was moving into Peace Church. Do you know what that priest said to her when she told him that? He said, “I know Peace Church. They were one of three churches that offered their space for our church when we were beginning”. Many, many years ago we had our doors open to the Orthodox Christians in our community. They did not choose to worship here, but we had the door wide open for them and they remembered that, so it was a wonderful culminating moment for Lynn that, in fact, they had come to the right place.

It is a great time for this church. It is a difficult time for this church, but it is a time when I believe that God is with us. God is guiding us to a new place, and we can give thanks, and we can rejoice in what God is doing in our lives. Thanks be to God for this day, for our church and what it has been, and for what it is becoming. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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