

Fruit of the Spirit: Peace

I'm going to start with a couple stories from the animal kingdom. A couple of Daryl's colleagues, also Air National Guard officers, were airline pilots in their civilian job. They flew internationally and both told a story about being in India and going out for a run.

While they were running, monkeys, probably macaques, would chase them and throw poop at them. Macaques have apparently been known to attack people walking in the cities. Depending on the specific species, monkeys can be very aggressive.

Then there's the capybara. The largest rodent in the world, capybaras love everyone and every species. It helps that they have very few natural predators, but they're also very social and friendly. There are pictures of them on the internet chilling with all sorts of animals – monkeys, dogs, birds, people, even crocodiles. Every creature seems to love capybaras.

Not only are humans genetically more closely related to the macaques, but their behavior is also all too often more like the macaques, throwing metaphorical poop at others and too often resorting to violence.

Although our nation is not currently directly involved in a war, I think you would be hard-pressed to say this is a particularly peaceful time.

If you are on social media, especially Facebook or Twitter, it's hard to avoid the divisiveness and rancor. Sometimes social media can feel like a bunch of macaques run wild, spewing poop everywhere.

Depending on where you get your news, you are potentially also exposed to pretty serious bias and major divisiveness. There are terribly biased and inflammatory news sources on both ends of the political spectrum.

No matter your news source, you experience a daily barrage of news about war in Ukraine, war in Gaza and elsewhere in the Middle East, and in places like Sudan and I don't know where else.

Here, we have our culture wars. We've got a contentious election year.

I think peace is the hardest of these fruits of the spirit to see right now. The divisiveness and meanness command so much of our attention, that we really have to look to find peace. But I do think it's out there. Humans are capable of being more like the capybaras.

We perhaps would all wish for peace...pray for peace even. But too often what people settle for instead of real peace is maintaining some kind of status quo. We may say we're agreeing to

disagree, or finding a middle ground. And sometimes that's the right thing. But when we sweep actual injustices under the rug, we are not really achieving peace.

Jesus and his early followers of course lived in the Roman Empire. They lived under something known as Pax Romana, or Roman peace – pax is Latin for peace. The Pax Romana is generally agreed upon as the time between Caesar Augustus whose reign began in 27 BC and Marcus Aurelius whose reign ended in 180.

It was a peace accomplished because the power of Rome was simply too great – all her enemies were defeated. There were a fair number of little rebellions, including ones by the Jews, but Rome had no problem squashing those.

Economically it was a prosperous time, at least for some.

But Pax Romana came at a great cost. Crucifixion was used to execute rebels but also to make them an example for other would-be rebels. It was dangerous to speak against the Emperor or to be seen as a challenger to his throne.

The prosperity was established on the backs of unjust and oppressive taxes and even slave labor. The military was very present and visible throughout the Empire and required conscription of a large army.

It was a peace that created unrest and anxiety among the people in Roman occupied lands.

It seems like real peace needs to be something more than just the absence of war.

Perhaps the most helpful way to think about peace is with the Hebrew word shalom. It's translated as peace. Shalom was in part a greeting that could be hello or goodbye. Shalom aleichem meant peace be upon you.

But the full meaning of the word is much richer. It goes far beyond the absence of war, or the absence of strife between individuals or groups.

It means well-being, security, harmony, and having what you need to thrive.

To be real peace, it has to be shalom for everyone. And it seems that's where we encounter difficulty. Pax Romana always assumed that the way to peace was through power and might...suppression of resistance, violently if need be. And it created winners and losers.

A peace that still leaves some on the outside of the full shalom is not a real peace.

Jesus and the kingdom of God are not that kind of peace.

The two gospel readings likely challenge us. We have Jesus, from the perspective of two different authors, appearing to contradict himself on this business of peace.

In the kingdom of God, the peace that passes all understanding does reign supreme. Jesus does indeed grant a peace that is unlike any other.

But in this now and not yet time, when we are living both in the kingdom of God and in the world as it is, there is conflict between the two. Standing up for the gospel of Jesus and the kind of reign he ushered in will cause conflict, just as it did for Jesus and his disciples. Those who benefit from the status quo are often not interested in a world in which they aren't the winners in a zero-sum game.

So peace may be harder to see in our time, but we do get glimpses.

So, anyone have any peace sightings?

Although there is often some controversy in the Olympics, it generally is pretty cool experience of peace. For example, this year when the ping pong teams of North and South Korea both medaled, there was a picture of them chatting and smiling together and taking selfies.

There's an old Bible camp song that starts, let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

So, if peace is going to begin with each of us, we first need to take a good, honest look at ourselves to see if there's something in us that has us feeling angry all the time.

Old hurts, addictions, resentments, and so on can make us more like macaques than capybaras. We need to deal with our own stuff to be peacemakers.

We also grow in peace in much the same way as I said about joy last week – by staying connected to our source of peace through prayer, meditation, scripture reading, time in nature.

We can work for peace in our families and neighborhoods by treating others the way we want to be treated. We can apologize when we're wrong. We can seek and grant forgiveness.

And I think most of all, we can be curious when we hear or see something that we don't agree with. As I said, agreeing to disagree isn't always the right thing to do. Sometimes what we disagree with is just plain wrong – it's opposed to the kingdom of God with its grounding in love.

But we can be curious and ask questions instead of jumping straight to condemnation. Typically, there will at a minimum be more to the story than we thought.

For those on social media, we can do better. We are so tempted by short, clever or caustic tweets, quotes, and memes about complex things that really resonate with what we believe.

But they are almost always at least partially wrong, and always incomplete. They should die the social media death of no likes or shares.

If you want to post something about an issue, and you're not an expert, then do some research. Ask people who do know about the issue. Write your own words.

And when we do need to make a stand for Jesus and the kingdom of God, we can do it with love, even for the enemies of the kingdom.

Peace seems like the most elusive of the fruits of the Spirit. We live in a time when outrage is almost our national pastime. It likely won't be until the kingdom of God has completely come into being that the peace of Christ will truly reign.

But in the meantime, we can hang on to the camp song as a prayer – let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.