

TO BE A PEACE PRIEST

Practicing (for) the kingdom: God's greetings and mutual greetings

Isaiah 41:8-10, 13; 1 Peter 2:9-10; John 20:19-23

“Grace to you and peace
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

We don't often think about

“God's greeting and mutual greetings”
as essential practices of worship.

Yes, greeting *each other* in worship is fairly common.

But have you ever thought about

“*God's* greeting” as an essential worship practice?

If you *haven't*,

it's probably our fault.

“God's greeting” is an ancient practice of Christian worship
that many churches have neglected, or completely forgotten.

Beginning today,

I think I'll launch a campaign to restore this practice
to our weekly worship at Park View.

As I said last Sunday,

we are here because God called us here.

God summoned us, and we came.

So naturally, if God invited us and we came,

God would want to greet us and welcome us.

God's greeting, in God's words, spoken on behalf of God . . .

such as words from Revelation 1:4-5—

“Grace to you and peace

from him who is and who was and who is to come,

and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.”

or the words Shirley used this morning from the apostle Paul,

“Grace, mercy and peace to you

from God our Father

and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Unfortunately, that rarely happens in most
evangelical Protestant churches.

It's not that we don't greet and welcome worshippers.

In fact, *most* churches make a big deal over welcoming people.

It's just that, it's not *God* doing the welcoming.

It's a representative of the *church*—minister or worship leader—
welcoming people *on behalf of the church*.

The *church* wants to be sure we all feel welcomed,
especially first-time visitors.

So we say, “Welcome to Park View Mennonite Church.

We're so glad you're here today.”

That is, *Park View Mennonite Church* is glad you're here today.

And right away, we've gotten worship off on the wrong foot.

We've forgotten whose party this is,

who invited us here,

and why we came.

At Park View, at least we usually give some dignity,
some weight, to the welcome.

But I've been to some churches that are extremely welcoming

and warm and friendly and hospitable,

but God's welcome doesn't figure in at all.

“*Good morning, everybody.*

Nice to see all of you here on this sunshiny morning.

Hope you're all comfortable.

Sit back and relax, leave your worries behind,

just enjoy what we have lined up for you today.

Let's start by singing one of our old favorites.”

You know, if you were blind-folded,

and didn't know the context,

and you were just hearing those opening words,

I think it would be hard to tell whether you were being welcomed

to a worship service,

or a school assembly,

or open mike night at the Little Grill.

Don't get me wrong.

It is absolutely important that as people come to this place
to gather together in the act of worship,
that they *know* they are welcomed,
that this is a place of hospitality and openness,
that everyone in the world is welcome to be here.

And they should get expressions of welcome,
as soon as they walk in the door,
and as they enter the sanctuary.
They are human beings, after all,
entering into a human community.
They need human greetings as they gather—
smiles, eye contact,
warm, welcoming words.

But once we are all in here, and ready to worship,
it should be perfectly clear
we did not come to be entertained and catered to.
We came because God called us here,
and we have work to do *together* for God.

That's why we *never*—
I know it's dangerous to use the word “never,” but let me repeat—
that's why we never, *ever*, refer to those sitting in the pews
as the audience.

In our worship services,
you are never the audience.
You are the *performers*. *God* is the audience.

And those who are up front,
who have prepared gifts to offer in worship—
who have practiced their music,
gone over their lines,
written calls to worship and prayers and sermons,
who have rehearsed their movements,
from lighting candles to sounding a gong
to serving communion—
whatever gifts people bring to the service,
they are *not* performing for *you*.

They are bringing these gifts to God,
with the expressed purpose and intention

that as you sit there and witness these gifts being offered,
you, *too*, will be drawn into the gift-giving experience,
that you will be moved in your spirit and mind and body
to give thanks and praise to God also,
that you will join them, vicariously, in their offering.
Whoever is offering their gift *should* offer the best they have.
They *should* prepare diligently, and practice.
They *should* take seriously the privilege of offering a gift.
The choir practices for an hour and 15 minutes every week,
to sing a 3-minute anthem.
Because we give God our first-fruits, not our left-overs.
We want our gifts to reflect our love and respect for God.
So no matter *who* the gifts come from,
whether from beginners or from experts,
it's important to honor the gifts being given.

But we are *still* not the audience.
Even when the gifts are being offered
by one person or a small group or a choir,
they become a collective gift from all of us to God.

Have you ever been to a big birthday party,
where the gifts are presented and opened
in front of everyone at the party?
Worship is kind of like that.

When someone at a birthday party presents the honored guest
with a particularly beautiful gift,
or one that's especially meaningful or fitting,
we are drawn into the joy of the recipient!
We rejoice *with* the one who is being honored!
We might even ooh or aahh or clap in appreciation,
but it's because we are rejoicing with the honored one.
We aren't congratulating the *giver*.
We might *admire* the giver,
but our deepest joy is for the recipient.
At a birthday party for Johnny, wouldn't it seem a bit *weird*,
if, when Mary presented Johnny with a really great gift,

Mary would hold up the gift she was giving,
and we all clapped for *Mary*, and she took a bow?
I've *been* to worship services just *like* that.

God's greeting, God's welcome to his party,
is an essential and significant action of worship,
because it sets the tone.
It reinforces and reminds us of the purpose of the whole event.

And what make it *especially* important to be reminded
is that this physical space and arrangement
looks a lot like *other* events
where the pews *are* occupied by an audience,
and the stage is occupied by performers.

In fact, we often use this very space for that purpose
at other times of the week.
If we're not careful,
we are easily lulled into thinking that we're here
for another good concert or performance or lecture.

The way we open the service needs to set the record straight!
We are not here as consumers,
we are not here to receive a performance.
We are here to perform.
We do God a necessary service.
That's why it's called a worship service.
We are here to serve God.

And since God called us here,
and it's God's party,
God should do the welcoming!

It's not really in my place
or the place of the worship leader to issue the welcome.
It's not *our house*.

When I go to a party in someone else's home,

and the doorbell rings,
I'm not the one to answer the door and welcome the next guest.
It's the homeowner that does that.

But thank God others are coming to the party, too.
Because the gift is always grander
when we all go together on it,
and present it as a people.
That's why God created a people
in which to be in a covenant relationship.

Christian worship is a practice of the Christian community.
In God's great banquet hall,
the host doesn't call me in with the words
"Kniss, party of one,"
and seat me at a little private table.
We are all invited together, equally, en masse,
and God himself issues the welcome.

With words, perhaps, like the ones we heard today from Isaiah 41,
"I have chosen you, the offspring of Abraham, my friends;
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners . . .
Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God.
I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand.
Come in. You are welcome."

But once the party gets underway,
there comes a sacred blurring of the distinction
between the vertical and the horizontal.
As we are drawn toward God collectively in worship,
we are drawn toward one another.
In fact, we cannot experience the fullness of Christian worship
without engaging each other.
At Johnny's birthday party, he wouldn't want all the guests to be quiet
and just stare at him the whole time.
He would want conversation and laughter and fellowship
to flow back and forth between the guests.

Fellowship is also essential for a full experience of Christian worship.
Not to the point that we are distracted, and forget whose party it is.
But fellowship enhances our worship of God,
it mediates God's presence and peace and joy to one another.

Just because we're human,
our experience of God must be mediated.
We represent God to one another.
And in most services we take turns representing God.
Sometimes it's the worship leader,
such as when Shirley read God's greeting to us this morning,
"Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ."
Sometimes it's the scripture reader.
Sometimes it's all of us together.

Especially when we participate in the ritual of mutual greetings.
We *first* receive God's greeting of grace and peace.
But then we imitate God, and extend that greeting to *others*.
That's what the practice of "passing the peace of Christ"
is all about.
It's one of the oldest rituals of worship,
dating back to the New Testament church.
In *that* era, it was the "kiss of peace," the "holy kiss."
You can find it in Romans 16, 1 Cor. 16, 2 Cor. 13, 1 Thess. 5.
The gesture might change, according to culture,
but the meaning is the same.

Although, as an *aside*,
Mennonites used to take the holy kiss as a literal command.
Which I, as a newly-baptized 12-year-old,
was less than thrilled about,
when all of a sudden the older men in the church
thought it to be their spiritual duty to greet me every Sunday,
right on the smackers, with a "holy kiss."
They *meant* well, of course.
They probably meant what *we* mean, in *part*,
when we turn to one or two people on Sunday morning,
and say, "The peace of Christ be with you."

They were being God's priests. *Peace* Priests.
It's our spiritual calling.
Our divine duty to each other.

From 1 Peter 2 this morning, we heard the apostle tell the church,
"You are a royal priesthood . . .
God's own people, called to proclaim the mighty acts
of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Once we become recipients of God's peace,
we are bound to pass on the good news,
to proclaim the same peace to others.

In the mutual greeting of peace—be it kiss, handshake, hug,
or a "namaste" kind of gesture,
whatever is culturally or personally appropriate—
we are fulfilling a biblical mandate.

We are doing as Jesus did, and as Jesus commissioned *us* to do.
In today's Gospel reading from John 20,
in one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances,
he pronounced God's peace to his disciples.
Not once, but *three* times.
"Peace be with you."
And then he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
"Just as God gave me the ministry of reconciliation,
so I give *you* this ministry.
Go in my name, speaking peace."

This ritual of passing the peace of Christ is much more than words.
We are re-enacting God's own greeting to us.
We are declaring that the peace of Christ is here,
with you, with me, and between you and me.
They are words spoken in faith.
They are words of ministry, *priestly* words.

As a Lutheran worship book puts it, and I quote,
"The exchange of the peace is a ministry,
an announcement of grace we make to each other,

a summary of the gift given to us . . .

This ministry we do to each other is far greater
than a sociable handshake or a ritual of friendship
or a moment of informality.

Because of the presence of Jesus Christ,
we give to each other what we are saying:
Christ's own peace."

Amazing isn't it, that Jesus Christ himself gives us the authority,
to pronounce, and thereby enact,
his peace on someone who needs to hear it?

There is a direct link between
the grace and peace we exchange with other,
and the grace and peace we experience from God.
As Jesus said to his disciples in this morning's Gospel,
"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
I don't think it's overstating, to say,
when we pass the peace of Christ to another,
we are performing ministry, on behalf of Christ.

We've been doing this ritual for quite some time now at Park View.
And we've done it in different ways,
usually personally, with one or two people near us,
and sometimes in unison as a whole body.
Many enter into it freely and joyfully.
Some with a little resistance.
I don't bemoan the fact
that some might feel less than fully comfortable.
Those who feel some resistance, and participate *anyway*,
are proof of what I've been saying—
we come to worship not as consumers,
but as servants of God and of each other.

Of course, as are *all* the practices of worship we engage in,
no one is forced to participate.
But you are invited, in whatever way you are able,
to be a peace priest

to the others worshiping with us today.

The purpose of this ritual is *not* to chit-chat and socialize,
as much as we might enjoy *doing* that.
It is to pronounce the peace of Christ on your neighbor—
whether friend or stranger—
with all the authority granted to you by Jesus himself.
And to accompany your words with a sign of peace—
if it's a handshake, fine,
if you want to be cautious about spreading or catching germs,
try the "namaste" sign of peace.

And since this isn't a mere social ritual,
there's no need to greet everyone within eyesight.
Just to the left or right or behind is plenty,
to make sure everyone gives and receives the greeting.

So let's stand, and in whatever wording you choose,
pronounce the peace of Christ to your neighbor,
and receive the same.

—Phil Kniss, January 16, 2011