

Sermon: Welcome One Another

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 4, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The 2009 film *Avatar*, written and directed by James Cameron, is an epic science fiction film, whereby humans are colonizing the planet Pandora in the mid 22nd century. Much of the film centred around colonizers' interaction with the indigenous tribe of Na'vi. By the way, Na'vi in Hebrew actually means 'prophet'. Perhaps it is the director's way of giving humanity a glimpse of its future in a subtle way. Perhaps.

I do not recall much of the plot line, but the one thing that stuck in my mind is how the Na'vi people greet one another. Instead of the usual greeting in the English language of 'how are you', or 'how's going', or 'good morning', or 'good day', the Na'vi people greet each other by stating simply 'I see you'. That's right—I see you!

It's a fabulous greeting if one really thinks about it. It is a simple acknowledgement of the existence of the other, that you are before me, your presence is noted. Your presence is neither positive nor negative, it simply is—I see you! I wonder if humanity somehow picks up on such a greeting, and it becomes universally adopted, widely used by all people and all nations, how might that change the way we treat one another. I wonder.

Brother and sister in Christ, today is the second Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Peace. On this Sunday, I want to move away from defining peace as a simple cessation of hostility to a more broader reflection on the extension of hospitality. Don't get me wrong, the absence of hostility goes a long way towards making peace. But I am more concerned, at least for today, on the presence of hospitality, on how we welcome one another, to ensure that peace would last, could endure. To that end, I am organizing today message into a three-point sermon: welcome one another by first seeing the other; welcome one another by speaking the truth in love; welcome one another by receiving the others onto oneself.

So the first point, **we welcome one another by first seeing the other**. As I stated before, seeing is acknowledging the presence of the

other. Not seeing, either by turning one's gaze away, or seeing pass as if the other is somehow invisible, is not only rude, it is degrading.

But seeing is so much more complicated than one realizes. Take for example, the front cover of this week's bulletin, the work of the artist Kelly Latimore. What do you see? The arrest photo of a black man? How does the title of the work, 'Martin Luther King, Jr' affect what you see? How does the halo over his head affect your perception on what is really going on?

Latimore only started painting icons since 2011. She was not taught by a traditional Iconographer, and she admits that she maybe breaking many rules, as some may find her work theologically unsound, yet for others, helpful and inspiring. The point of her work is to create more dialogue, healthy dialogue on who are the saints that are among us here and now? I don't know if there really existed a police arrest photo of Dr. King, as painted by Latimore. Yet her work exists as a critical commentary on the racial tension in contemporary North America, particularly in light of the movement Black Lives Matter, triggered by arrests and unnecessary death in the hands of police of a number of Black and brown individuals.

Seeing is so much more than sight. Seeing and perceiving the right way, is acknowledging the others the right to exist, to live as equal on this planet Earth. Seeing and perceiving in the Christ-like way, is acknowledging that we are all created by God, that God sees each one of us as good. We may have fallen, as all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But the breath of God remains in us; the Spirit of God is still at work in all of us. The Spirit of God is still creating and recreating us as a potter reworks the marred and ruined clay. God is not finished with us, therefore, no one has any right to finish us.

On to the second point, **welcome one another by speaking the truth in love.** It is a prominent teaching of the Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 4:15. The truth refers to not just facts, but to that which is doctrinally correct. Speaking the truth in love can only proceed from a biblically committed life to a person who maybe in need of correction. It goes beyond simple tolerance.

Tolerance as a virtue, in the form that is commonly accepted and practiced in Canada, is actually no virtue at all. To tolerate others may be a good way to get along, to be polite, to live in a non-confrontational society. But if we truly profess the Christian faith, if we truly believe that sin exists, that repentance is needed by all, lest we be judged by the ultimate Judge,

then tolerance quite simply means ‘I don’t care about you; your welfare, your salvation, your rightful place before God is not my concern.’ Tolerance is indifference, whereas love is having an honest dialogue about our differences. Speaking the truth in love is the true gesture of welcoming others.

The Gospel reading today, in Matthew 3:1-12, provides us a great example. John the baptizer was baptizing people from all walks of life. In the wilderness of Judea, he was proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” People from all over Jerusalem, Judea and surrounding regions were going out to John, confessing their sins and were baptized by him in the river Jordan.

Some in the crowd were Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of the day who were, plainly put, self-serving and self-righteous hypocrites. They talked a good talk of faith but would not walk to walk. Now John could’ve turned them away and refused to baptize them, or he could’ve played nice and tolerated their presence. But instead, John called them out, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath!” Now, that is not a nice greeting, isn’t it?

But John proceeded to teach them. He taught them not to trust in their ancestry, in their ascribed positions of power, but instead to repent and to bear fruit. John then proceeded to baptize them, but warned them again that he may baptize them with water, but the one who is coming after him—pointing of Jesus Christ—is more powerful than he. Christ will baptize all with Holy Spirit and fire, and he will separate the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the sinners. John spoke the truth, he did so out of love, and that is truly welcoming the other.

Onto the last point, **welcome one another by receiving the others onto oneself.** To understand this, we need to do a deep dive into the Greek text of Romans 15:4-13. Apostle Paul instructs us to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

The word ‘welcome’ in Greek is *proslambanó* (προσλαμβάνω). It is a construct of two words: *pros* (meaning working towards) and *lambano* (meaning to accept, to receive). A more graphic and visual explanation of *lambano* is to take another person’s hand and to bring it onto oneself. Perhaps the best example I could think of is when during a wedding ceremony, as the bride is walking down the aisle, her hand is customary led by her father, then is passed onto the groom. When the groom receives the hand of the bride, he is receiving her onto himself—that is *lambano* in

Greek. Proslambanó, working towards receiving and accepting one another in an intimate and life-altering way, is what Paul is urging us to do, just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.

To illustrate his point, Paul provided 4 examples from the Scripture. I won't go into details of each, but suffice to say that they all have to do with the word 'goyim' in Hebrew, or commonly translated as 'nations' or 'peoples'.

'Goyim' in the Old Testament is a neutral word, having both positive and negative usages. The promise of God to Abraham is to make him a great nation, and he will be the father of all 'goyim'. The people of Israel are sometimes referred to as 'goyim', because they are to be a nation of priests, repressing God's kingdom on earth. The countries surrounding Israel and Judah are always referred to as 'goyim'. As the people of God fell into covenantal unfaithfulness, the 'goyim' or nations took on increasingly negative roles and connotation. By the inter-testamental period, particularly during the Maccabean revolt, the goyim and the Judean were regularly killing one another, with the nations having clear upper-hand, meaning doing most of the killing. 'Goyim' in the Hebrew language is then substituted in the Greek language with 'ethnos', as in ethnics or ethnicities. By the time of the New Testament, 'ethnos' was clearly a word with a very negative connotation, which is usually translated in the English version of the Bible as the Gentiles.

The point that I am making through this word study is that the Jews and the Gentiles did not get along. In fact, you could say to be a good Law abiding Jew, one must hate the Gentiles with every fibre of one's being. It is in such a context that Paul wrote to his contemporaries, both Jews and Gentiles, to welcome one another, to see each other, to work through differences in honest and mutually loving way, to take each other's hands and bring them intimately into one's bosom, to accept and to receive one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ, just as Christ Jesus accepts and receives all of us.

It is a message of peace that still challenges us to this day, on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Peace, as we eagerly await the coming of Christ, to make all things new.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.