

Peace Poles, Candles, & People
May 17, 2015
Matthew 5:9

This morning's Scripture reading is a single verse taken from a portion of the Sermon on the Mount called the Beatitudes. It calls us to be and to become peacemakers.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God of peace, remind us that we are your children as we make peace throughout the world. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Growing up in Texas I learned that bigger is better or, at least, bigger is much more likely to attract attention. In the late 1990s when creative decorating with candles was booming I saw some very large candles in homes and offices. Even the largest of these – candles nearly as large as I am – look tiny when placed beside the world's largest candles.

We can thank Darrel Brock for constructing the world's largest candle. Back in 1971 his team ran a natural gas line up through the center of an existing 50-foot silo then put over 45,000 pounds of multi-colored wax on the outside.¹

When the owner of a candle company creates such a massive candle alongside his candle factory we have assume it is a marketing strategy. While that may have been true, it was also intended to be something far more significant.

The world's largest candle was dedicated by Mr. Brock, the town's mayor, and the state's governor before a crowd of over 5,000 people as the peace candle of the world. And, this candle was designed to burn from that day forward as an eternal flame for the cause of peace.²

¹ Peace Candle of the World

<http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM23XR_Peace_Candle_of_the_World_Scappoose_Oregon>

² Ibid.

Since I wasn't born when the world's largest peace candle was dedicated, perhaps it is in my best interest to focus on more recent happenings . . .

A few days after arriving as your Transitional Pastor in January, I encountered an oddly shaped box. This cardboard container was quite long and rather narrow. Within the box was a white pole with black lettering on all sides. It was a gift from your former Pastor, Phil White. It was a peace pole in search of a permanent home here on our church campus.

While the Trustees and Council and a few others with impeccable taste were pondering which of the many possible locations would be ideal, another peace symbol appeared. When I first learned of this second symbol, it existed only in the form of an idea - an idea that was birthed several years ago. Back then, following considerable discussion, the Board of Deacons and the Board of Missions decided to acquire a peace candle for our sanctuary. This year the current members of those same groups decided they were ready to select and purchase our peace candle.

In early March we planted our peace pole. At the dedication I spoke about the peace pole as an internationally-recognized symbol of the hopes and dreams of the entire human family, standing vigil in silent prayer for peace on earth. Peace poles started in Japan in 1955 when one person decided to dedicate his life to spreading the message, "May Peace Prevail on Earth" in response to the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Today, tens of thousands of peace poles around the world carry that same hope for peace on all of their sides, typically in different languages.

In April our new Conference Minister, John Vertigan, visited our congregation. I invited him to preach about any passage and any topic he wanted. John, as many of you likely recall, focused on peace.

Now, in May, we have placed our peace candle. It sits next to the baptismal font. In a few minutes we will dedicate it. We will join in an affirmation of faith saying together that we believe in the power of non-violence, the worth of all people, and God's promise to establish a kingdom of justice and peace.

If you have much experience with beliefs such as this you know they move people to action. Earlier this week the Board of Missions along with a work group they have authorized to study gun violence gathered in Fellowship Hall for a webinar. Hosted by the Florida Conference and involving one of our national staff who serves as policy advocate for international issues the webinar told the story of our denomination's Just Peace movement, which was started some 30 years.

Since 1985 well over 100 congregations have gone through some sort of self-study resulting in congregational votes to become Just Peace churches. Here in Florida, six congregations are Just Peace churches. These congregations are not merely signing on to a specific list of beliefs or action steps; they are crafting their own Just Peace statements and seeking to make a difference in the world guided by those documents.

We are not – at least not yet – a Just Peace congregation. We are, however, a place where I expect conversations about how we might work together to make our world a place of peace.

In a world where peace is anything but common, we need frequent reminders to be a people of peace. Our reminders often come in the form of symbols of all shapes and sizes:

the peace candle of the world is 50 feet tall,
our peace pole is 8 feet tall, and
our peace candle is 8 inches tall.

Symbols are not the thing. Symbols are objects that point to something greater than themselves. Peace symbols are not objects of beauty to observe in art galleries; they are symbols calling us to act by bringing about peace.

Symbols change over time. These changes help us to realize the value of the symbol is not in its physical characteristics, but in its power to direct us to something greater.

The world's largest peace candle didn't burn forever as was originally planned. When the original owner realized the cost, he opted to burn it occasionally. While the flame has not always been constant, the candle

itself has stood strong as a symbol for peace, and its importance was affirmed again in 1997 when it underwent a renovation.

2015 is a year in the life of this congregation when we are emphasizing peace. With the dedication of our peace pole and peace candle we recommit ourselves to being and becoming the peacemakers Jesus intends.

We are in transition – we are being renovated, restored and renewed. As we move into the future, may we respond to Jesus' call to be a people of peace.

My favorite contemporary paraphrase of the Bible, The Message, renders this morning's Bible verse in words that invite practical actions:

You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

Amen.