

## “The Peacemaker Question”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Oct. 11, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ  
website: [www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/](http://www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/)

*Scripture Text:*

- Matthew 5:1-12 [NRSV]
- Two other key sources:
  1. Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis? Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins/Harper One, 2019)
  2. David French, *Divided We Fall: America’s Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020)

### OPENING

- There are some verses of Scripture that conjure in our minds a personal experience that gives it a life of its own, beyond the text. Matthew 5:9 is one of those: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.*

(\*Archbishop Elias Chacour, his *Mar Elias Educational Institutes*, and our pilgrimage to the Holy Land in March of 2019.\*)



- But that’s not what this sermon is about, really. Because as personal as it was – and is – to me and those of us who were on that pilgrimage, that level of peacemaking is Elias Chacour’s story, not mine and not yours. You and I need a story much closer to home for the verse about peacemaking to generate within us a life beyond the text.

I would suggest that the polarizing and factionalizing we are experiencing in our nation at this time, while not at the level of violence as seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – at least not yet, provide us with a contemporary context to consider peacemaking in very personal terms today.

I'd like not to have to speak to the political realities of our time in worship, but...(\*Reference to Karl Barth and Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."\*)

## TO THE SCRIPTURES

To begin, I want to remind us of the key verse in the Scripture passage today:

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

We've spent a lot of time in this worship series talking about our "primary grid" for evaluating what is central in our Christian faith. We've talked about that in terms of the "tetherball pole" that anchors this very serious game we're playing with the reality of our faith and how it equips us to live courageously and compassionately in the world and with integrity.

For today, the grid is provided by the Beatitudes, with the assumption being that each of us hopes for the "blessedness" Jesus promises.

Now, if you are dismissive of the notion of being a peacemaker or if you couldn't care less about being a child of God, then you might as well get up and leave this Sanctuary or turn off live streaming and do something else with the remainder of this hour! Because this is very serious stuff, and I don't want to waste your time. And I don't want to trivialize the subject matter by making it easy for you to half-listen to "a nice sermon on peacemaking" without being challenged.

## SERMON THOUGHTS

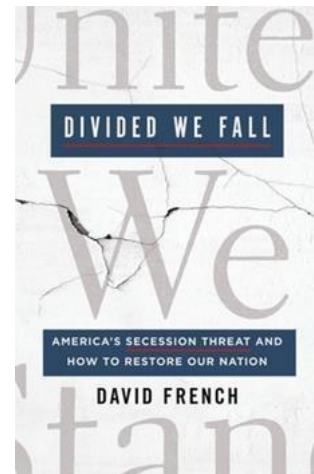
*Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called children of God.*

There are a lot of ways to unpack this extraordinarily compact verse. For our purposes today, I'm going to use a few ideas from a conservative Christian lawyer named David French who has done a lot of work with Constitutional law and is a student of early American history and politics and a proponent of an educated understanding of the views of the Founders of our Republic as an antidote to "what ails us" today.

This is important because, while Jesus promises blessedness for those who are peacemakers, He doesn't leave a manual about how that should be done in any given situation. And we're going to see that, of all the unlikely sources, a few passages in our founding documents provide remarkable guidance for how peacemaking can be done today. We ignore them – and Jesus' exhortation – to our peril, warns David French.

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

While David French has written a lot on this and many related subjects, I'll be sharing a few ideas from his very recent book, *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (\*Ppt Slide #6.\*)



Despite the ominous-sounding subtitle, this is not to be alarmist, but to help us look at ourselves and the dynamics in our nation in a fresh, even if disturbing, light. (\*A word about why I share the sources of my thoughts...\*)

- I. A Little About Geography and our Current State of Polarization
  - A. The nation
  - B. Our denomination
- II. The Notion of Tolerance vs. Fellowship/Tribalism
- III. James Madison and *Federalist No. 10* [French, Introduction, nook p. 19]
  - A. Madison's warning against the "violence of faction"
    1. First, a definition as Madison uses the term in *Federalist No. 10*: A **faction** is a "number of citizens united and actuated by some common impulse of passion or of interest, adverse to (\*and that's the key term\*) the rights of other citizens or to the

permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

2. Understand, Madison was not against associations of citizens based on common principles, values, goals for society, etc. He knew these to be inevitable.

In fact he wrote, "As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed." In other words, the "latent causes of faction are sown into the nature of man." [Madison as quoted by French, Introduction, nook pp. 19-20]

3. No, the warning from Madison is about such groups setting themselves up against "the rights of other citizens or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

My paraphrase: "Your freedom ends where mine begins, and my freedom ends where yours begins."

- B. Madison's Antidote: True tolerance manifested in the larger society as Pluralism: a multiplicity of groups of citizens/persons with a wide array of perspectives, values, even agendas (description my own).
  1. Pluralism, based in federalism and free speech / peaceable assembly. Sound familiar? It should; it's First Amendment language, language Madison wrote as part of the Bill of

Rights, without which the ratification of our Constitution would probably have failed.

2. This is not the same thing as urging political moderation (the same moderate views to be held by all) or lamenting, “Why can’t we all just get along?”

3. It IS saying that we need to allow for and defend the right of diverse groups to form, recruit, speak, and peaceably assemble, however distasteful we might find their “platform”, knowing that a plurality of such groups will prevent any one from dominating the political and societal landscape – if, indeed, it sets itself against the freedoms guaranteed **to all** in our Constitution, of which James Madison, with “his” Bill of Rights, was a leading champion.

## CONCLUSION

John Adams, the 2<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States, made an observation concerning the assumed context of the American experiment in self-governance: Godliness. Hear what he wrote:

“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” [As quoted by French, Conclusion].

Each faith tradition in the country today needs to describe what is meant by these two terms, “morality and “religiosity” for their communities, but I believe that there is enough commonality in the ethical

teachings of the various religions – that is, those that deal with how we should treat each other – that we, even as a very diverse nation, can reflect faithfully and fruitfully Adams’ understanding of “a moral and religious People.”

If our politics are first in forming the basis of our value system rather than what we as Christians know to be consistent with the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then we are not only living a lie of faith, we are, as a nation, living on borrowed time – if John Adams is to be believed, anyway.

## HOPE

Which brings us to what you might not see coming: a HOPEFUL conclusion to the message today.



We have all we need in Christ to be who we are called to be as godly people!

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

Our national union need not be threatened by factions and violent civil strife.

We do NOT need to equate the character of our neighbors with what we identify as the worst of their politics and seek to stamp out their right to their opinions.

We do need to reacquaint ourselves in a rigorous way – and not simply a populist or partisan way – with our nation’s Founders’ principles and writings.

And we need to gain some clarity concerning our “tetherball pole”. What is it that we use as our primary grid in assessing what is central to our Christian faith? And, therefore, what is central to how we should live in peace with one another?

It’s not a mystery; it’s all there for us in what we’ve been talking exploring these last several weeks as *Jesus’ FAQ’s on the Kingdom of Heaven*:

- The “Who do YOU say that I am?” Question
- The Neighbor Question
- The Image Question
- The Truth Question
- The Power Question
- The Fear Question
- The Caesar Question
- The Peacemaker Question

Let us pray...(with Lord’s Prayer