

# The 64th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

## Friday, July 16, 2010

### Bible Study Essay 5: The Kiss of Peace

This “Bible Study Essay” is the fifth of five essays that Ted Kober prepared for the 64th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It was originally presented on Friday, July 16, 2010. The theme of the convention was “One People—Forgiven.”

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Note that each Bible study essay provides discussion questions in the middle of the document. In the original convention, only 5 minutes was provided for this discussion because of time constraints. However, when used in other settings, we recommended that much more time be allowed for discussion of these questions.

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*Presented by Ted Kober*

Brothers and sisters, One People—Forgiven,

The peace of the Lord be with you.

[Response: And also with you.]

The sharing of Christ’s peace is a special privilege given to One People—Forgiven. Referred to as the “kiss of peace” in the early church, this phrase was never meant to be a casual “hello, how are you” type of greeting. But in many of our churches, it has become a trite tradition that has little meaning other than a “Holy Howdy.” What does the “sharing of the peace” really mean to Jesus’ followers?

### First, Go and Be Reconciled

Jesus places a high priority on reconciliation among his disciples. In Matthew 5:22-24, he says:

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.<sup>1</sup>

In the Upper Room, after washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus predicts that one of them will betray him, and then he prepares them for what is to come. “A new

commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Paul often encouraged the believers to greet each other in a special way. In Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, and 2 Corinthians 13:12, he said, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” To the Thessalonians he wrote, “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss” (1 Thessalonians 5:26).

Peter also urged, “Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ” (1 Peter 5:14).

Obviously, reconciliation among Christ’s followers is meant to be a way of life.

Our unity in Christ is a profound truth that means more than just belonging to the same church. We belong to Christ’s body, and he calls us to demonstrate our unity in him by the way we love one another. Because of Christ, we belong *to each other*.

Our unity is not dependent on the moral perfection of disciples, but rather on what God has done for us in Christ. Because we are God’s reconciled children, we are urged to practice reconciliation by confessing our sins and forgiving one another as God through Christ has forgiven us. Accordingly, we are taught to greet one another with the peace that unites us. It is the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (see Philippians 4:7).

## Conflict and the Lord's Supper

The early Christian Church recognized the importance of seeking reconciliation before worship. They took seriously Jesus' admonition to go and be reconciled before offering their gift.

Addressing their numerous divisions, St. Paul admonished the Corinthians to reconcile. He noted that their disunity was especially offensive as they celebrated the Lord's Supper together (see 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34). To celebrate the unity we have together in Christ while divisions and factions remain among us is a contradiction of our faith.

Thus, the believers practiced the "kiss of peace" during their worship. Greeting each other with a holy kiss (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:20), they shared, "The peace of the Lord be with you." If anyone had difficulty sharing the peace due to unresolved issues, they were urged to reconcile before taking communion.

In earliest Christian liturgies, this practice occurred at the end of the Service of the Word or at the beginning of the Eucharistic section. The purpose: To encourage any who had unresolved conflict to be reconciled prior to celebrating the Lord's Supper at the same table. A form of the "passing of the peace" exists in some of our Lutheran worship services today. In *Lutheran Service Book* (LSB), the following direction is indicated in Divine Service, Setting 1 after the Prayer of the Church and before the offering:

Following the prayers, the people may greet one another in the name of the Lord, saying, "Peace be with you," as a sign of reconciliation and of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Matt. 5:22-24; Eph. 4:1-3).<sup>2</sup>

Encouraging worshipers to casually greet one another and meet visitors can be a useful practice, especially in a society where we tend to self-isolate or only talk to those we know. But common niceties cannot replace the necessity to "make every effort to maintain the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) among God's children.

## Unreconciled Relationships Affect the Community of Faith

A man who held resentments against the senior pastor strategically sat in the church so that he could receive

communion from the other pastor. Those around him always felt uncomfortable as he slandered the senior pastor before church. He used a tape recorder to record the pastor's sermons in an attempt to convince the district president to remove the pastor from the clergy roster.

In another church, two former friends refused to sit near each other in church so that they wouldn't have to greet one another nor share the communion rail. Their supporters also sat near them and talked about "the other side" just before worship began. What a way to prepare for worship! What a witness to visitors!

Those who worship together yet remain unreconciled disrupt the community of faith.

In the Philippian congregation, a dispute between two women was so serious that Paul addressed them by name in his letter, urging them to be reconciled. While we don't know what the disagreement was about, it must have been substantial enough to disturb Paul, who wrote this epistle from prison.

Our text for today includes his admonition to the women and the entire church. In this section, you will hear very familiar verses that are often quoted. But as you listen, remember that these well-known passages were given in the context of dealing with a conflict between two members of the same congregation.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is com-

mendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:2-9)

## Small Group Reflection Questions

- 1) Why do you think Paul found it necessary to address these two conflicted women in his letter to the Philippian church?
- 2) Who is responsible for helping to reconcile relationships in the church? (Answer both from the text and then applying that to your own congregation.)
- 3) Identify Paul's main points for assisting congregational members in conflict:
  - a. Verse 4 – How can this be done, even when conflict is present?
  - b. Verse 5
  - c. Verse 6 (two points)
  - d. Verse 7
  - e. Verse 8
  - f. Verse 9
- 4) Without revealing confidences, share an example of when an unresolved conflict affected the entire congregation.
- 5) Protecting confidences, share an example of when a reconciliation among people in the church had a positive effect.

## Is a True Form of the “Kiss of Peace” Still Applicable Today?

Can today's Church really reclaim what the Scriptures teach and what our church fathers practiced?

While kissing others in public greetings is not part of our American culture, the sharing of Christ's peace in reconciliation is just as valid today as in the ancient church.

Throughout history since the fall, God's people have sinned against God and one another. The church is not immune from the effects of sin.

A woman once told a church reconciler that she

couldn't believe that her church could actually be in conflict. After all, they were all Christian people, weren't they? The reconciler shared with her a different perspective.

“You know, it's a funny thing. I hear that they actually allow sick people in hospitals.”

The church is a hospital for sinners. People come to seek healing. Because they suffer from the hurts and pains of a sin-filled world, they sometimes lash out at other sinners, including those who serve them. Those who administer the treatments are susceptible to the same temptations—they too need Christ's promises and are sometimes attacked for their work.

And yet, we can rejoice that at least these people gather together where the healing is offered through Word and Sacrament.

As long as saints are also sinners, we need to receive and share Christ's peace. The “kiss of peace” is just as necessary and salutary today as it was in the early church.

## How the “Kiss of Peace” Can Benefit Individuals

Marsha first learned about the original intent of the “kiss of peace” in a peacemaking seminar.<sup>3</sup> The next day in worship, she quietly made her way to the balcony during the offering. Her church shared the peace before Communion. Marsha held a well-known grudge against Mark, the choir director. She reached her hand out to Mark: “I'm so sorry—I can't believe I've let our disagreements come between us. The peace of the Lord be with you.” They were reconciled in the balcony. The whole church learned what happened when Marsha and Mark walked down the aisle together for Communion. Everyone witnessed in them the peace of God that transcends all understanding!

## How the “Kiss of Peace” Can Benefit the Church and Those Outside the Church

Disagreements between the elders and church council polarized the congregation.<sup>4</sup> Church attendance declined and offerings fell. Many stopped talking to one

another but had no difficulty gossiping about one another. Blame-shifting replaced repentance and became a substitute for true justification.

With Bible study and assistance through mediation, the two leadership boards reconciled through confession and forgiveness. Encouraged to share their restoration, they agreed to jointly confess their sins to the congregation in worship, just prior to the offering, in accord with Matthew 5:23-24. The visiting pastor led the congregants in announcing God's grace to them.

These restored lay leaders then reminded their members that many of them also needed reconciliation, and suggested that they take this opportunity to do so. They were instructed to go to someone with whom they had been in conflict and offer the greeting, "The peace of the Lord be with you." People were encouraged to exchange mutual confession and forgiveness.

What happened next was a miracle. For 30 minutes people moved across the sanctuary to share God's peace with those whom they had broken relationships. Many approached people they had avoided for months. Tears were shed amid quiet confessions and the sharing of forgiveness. As the Holy Supper was celebrated, more tears flowed. No one complained about the long service.

Afterwards, a young man visiting the church stuck around to meet with the pastor. "You know, I'm been searching for something more meaningful in life. I've never been part of a group that really practices what it preaches. I know that no one here is perfect, but they know how to show Jesus' love. I would like to learn more about this church."

## Reconciliation: Risky Business

Reconciliation is never easy. In many ways, the "holy howdy" is safer and much more comfortable than the original "kiss of peace." And casual greetings are important!

However, what Jesus endured for our reconciliation was anything but safe or comfortable. He suffered a horrific death to restore us to his Father while we were yet sinners. But he rose from the grave to declare victory over sin, death, and the devil. We cherish our forgiveness given through his Word. We are forgiven through the waters of Holy Baptism. We receive his forgiveness in his very body and blood, celebrating

our unity in him as we commune together at his table.

Fellow beggars, because God risked his own Son for us, we are forgiven. Because we are related by Christ's blood, we have been made One People. Because we have been reconciled, we are called to be messengers of his grace to one another and to those outside the body of Christ.

As we move closer to the end of our time together in synod convention, consider how you can share the peace of the Lord with someone here or someone at home. And the next time you hear, "The peace of the Lord be with you," remember what the "kiss of peace" is really about.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

We pray with the author of Hebrews:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip [us] with everything good that [we] may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (v. 13:20-21)

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Names and certain details have been changed to protect confidences.

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