

Sermons from Park Hill: March 8, 2009

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org

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Luke 19: 41-42, Mark 8: 31-37
**“Peace Based on Fantasy or
Reality?”**

Have any of you been to Disney World? Or any Disney theme park? Even though amusement parks are not really my thing, I've been to Disneyland, Disney World, and Disney's Animal Kingdom in Orlando. Next Stop!? EuroDisney! (Not really)

I liked Disney Animal Kingdom the best because the focus isn't on the rides. It's a beautiful place. And Disney claims it is a place of peace and harmony, despite \$20 hamburgers. According to their website, "Every path in the park leads to thrilling encounters with the real, imaginary, and extinct creatures. So get ready for a journey into the mysteries, marvels, and thrills of the ever-unfolding story of animals."

Encounters with the real, imaginary, and extinct creatures. That's quite a promise! I was struck by the image of the difference between real and imaginary, or authentic and fantasy. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and lamented, if they only knew what made for real peace, authentic peace. A lot of the time, we prefer an imaginary peace, a peace based on fantasy. Not necessarily Disney World fantasy, but a peace based on our ignoring problems.

Peter scolded Jesus when he was told about the rejection and persecution that Jesus was about to go through as they moved toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem would be a place of confrontation with the authorities who saw Jesus as a threat; a threat to their status as powerful, a threat to their wealth generated on the backs of peasants; a threat to taxes for Caesar in Rome and tithes to the high priest in Jerusalem. Everyone with peace and security now was afraid about this guy who treated women as equals, who ate dinner with people everyone was supposed to hate, who taught that compassion was more important than perfection. He wept at the injustice of those he thought should know better. He was a threat to their fantasy peace on behalf of those who were outcasts. And became a model for us to follow.

Jesus knew that real peace, authentic peace, is found by going through our adversities, taking on our stuff, taking up our cross, not doing everything we can to avoid it. Authentic peace, whether in world affairs or in personal relations,

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comes through authentic struggle – being true to ourselves, despite the cost. We are called to be real. Being true to our brothers and sisters, neighbors and strangers, when they are down and out. And then we will know real peace.

At the center of the Disney Animal Kingdom is this enormous thing called the Tree of Life – sounds really biblical doesn't it? The Tree of Life towers 14 stories above the park and is 50 feet across at its base. It's huge, and it's meant to be a powerful symbol at the center of the Park representing, "the interconnected nature of all living things." Into its gnarled roots, enormous trunk and uplifted branches are carved the shapes of more than 300 animal forms (everything but a mouse named Mickey or a dog named Pluto.) The entire Tree is surrounded by shimmering pools and grass filled with all kinds of birds and small mammals. "Every guest is invited to stroll in a garden embedded in the root system of the tree, filled with otters, flamingos, colorful ducks, storks, cranes, and cockatoos." Paradise.

But don't be fooled. This didn't come from Mother Nature. The Tree of Life is a 14 story fake, although very beautiful and appealing. And though it seems truly peaceful and harmonious, the Animal Kingdom is not real. They've created a peaceful and more perfect world, but it is only an illusion. Without the carefully camouflaged fences, wolves will still eat lambs. Animals get sick and die, and the Tree of Life is lifeless – a huge piece of decorative scenery. We are intrigued by the Animal Kingdom because it

touches a chord deep within us: a longing for a world of peace and order because so much of what we see and know is chaos and conflict.

In fact, sometimes we are so desperate to avoid conflict, we will set aside our core beliefs and justify things like animal cruelty and environmental destruction in order to maintain the peace. But as Martin Luther King would say, there can be no place of peace and harmony without justice. Where there is no justice – in the social order or in our individual lives – there is no peace. Peace without justice is a fantasy – problems covered over and silenced so we aren't bothered by them. We beg off with questions like "Why should I care?" or "What does that have to do with me?" We hear statements like "The poor would be fine if they would just get a better job. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth wouldn't get picked on if they just kept quiet about it. Racism doesn't exist anymore because we have an African American president."

Do any of those things have to do with fantasy peace or real peace? And all of those things have to do with both being true to ourselves – confronting our own fears or prejudices – and being real with the world – speaking up despite the personal cost. For me, Jesus is the model for how I do it. Jesus did not avoid conflict. He stood up for those who were down and he stood next to those who needed a friend – again, at great personal cost. But it was, and is, the only price worth a real and authentic peace.

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Yet, the other side of Jesus as model for me is that he truly did not do it on his own. Peace, he taught, is a human and divine partnership. Jesus got both his mission and his strength from God. Life is not a do-it-yourself project. Maybe it is for some, but on my own, I can only do so much. Actually, on my own, I only *want* to do so much. Without the encouragement of the church, I would probably only be concerned with my own issues.

If Kate didn't talk about Gaza, or Peg get us to take care of orphans in Uganda, or Randy organize us to serve meals to destitute seniors, or Karen keep us faithful to homeless families, or Marie speak passionately about GLBT youth of color, or Bev about immigration, or Lucy about health care, or... The danger of naming anyone is not naming everyone. But, in other words, I need everyone to keep speaking and acting to help me not settle for an inauthentic peace. And I need God; I want God. Peace and harmony come from an inner transformation. Having confronted conflict either within myself or in the world – I am changed. That change is God. Not my will, Jesus said, but God's will be done. And, for me, that makes all the difference.

Frederick Buechner is a great writer and he said about transformation by God: Little by little, the person who has been loved becomes a loving person; the person who has been forgiven, becomes a forgiving person; the person who has been healed, becomes a healing person. "And God does most of it." I love that. The person who has been loved, who knows they are loved

unconditionally, becomes a loving person. Who then changes the world. Real love, like real peace, is not satisfied with just "me, myself, and I." If only we knew what made for real peace.

At Disney, real, imagined, and extinct creatures live in harmony. Mickey Mouse and a pterodactyl sharing a salad under the big concrete tree. But things are not so peaceful in our world – in school we understand bullies and persecution, at work where we experience prejudice, in our neighborhoods where we witness violence, in our homes where we struggle to be heard and understood, in our hearts where we struggle to just understand ourselves. Don't we all crave a solution?

I don't know who said it, but this speaks to me: Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is a condition of wholeness in one's self and justice in our world, that requires us to listen carefully for wisdom and always seek understanding, to speak our truth and stand up for others to speak their own, a willingness to act to confront reality to bring about transformation and surrender our will to the greater good, the ultimate love of self, neighbor and utter amazement in God, our Creator.

Fantasy peace, on the other hand, avoids conflict, claims ignorance at the problems of the world, silences our desires for an authentic self, distances us from anyone different from ourselves, and questions why we should care.

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Imaginary peace is less work: Shut your eyes,
close your hearts, zip up your wallets.

But, we do know what makes for real peace: Be
true to God's true self living through you and
that will make the difference.