



**Sunday, September 13**

Peace in Relationships

**Family of Choice**

*Henry Koenig Stone*

John 19:26–27

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** When it comes to relationships, we humans are often quick to categorize them, to put them in boxes — as though the relationships of all parents to their children, or all partners to their spouses, or all friends to each other, followed the same patterns.

In some ways, of course, there are important delineations. Children do not have all the same responsibilities that parents do. Clear communication about boundaries between friendship and romance can be important. And adults need to be careful about the lessons they teach and the examples they set for children, in order to help them grow up happily and healthily. But in paying attention to the nuts and bolts of what makes a parent a parent and a friend a friend, it is easy to lose the common thread: proactive nurture.

I love this passage from John because it emphasizes that even as Jesus was being stripped of all the physical ways to be a son, teacher or friend in the traditional senses of the words, he focused on what he could do to help the people around him heal themselves and persist. He knew that, although they were losing him, Mary and John could be a family of choice to each other.

This week, we will reflect on family, on teaching and on relationships more broadly. Different lessons will apply to different situations. But throughout nearly all human interactions, there are opportunities to extend healing and growth.

**Practice for Peacemakers:** For at least one full day this week, try to imagine that everyone you meet is a member of your immediate family. This doesn’t mean that you necessarily talk to them

differently out loud — you don't need extra access to their time to do this, and your barista isn't suddenly "Cousin Starbucks!" What it *does* mean is that you should treat each interaction with the same intentionality as you would with someone that you'll see every day for the rest of your life. Although this approach may not be practical in the long term, the goal is to practice being aware of the impact that your words and actions have on people at work, in the community and at home.

**Prayer:** Dear God, help us to remember that we are all members of your beloved family, parts one body in Christ. Inspire us to live out relationships of nurture toward all those whom we call "family," whether they be biological family or family by choice. Amen.



Henry Koenig Stone is the editor for this year's Season of Peace Reflections. An activist and public policy wonk, he has previously served as editor of "*Unbound*" in Louisville, KY, and as associate for young adult social witness to the Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy.



**Monday, September 14**

Peace in Relationships

**Making Peace as a Child**

*Suzanne Gangemi*

Matthew 5:9

*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. ("The Message")*

**Reflection:** Children's Ministry and peacemaking go together like hugs and kisses, like mud puddles and splashing feet. Depending on the context, young children can be very open to new ideas and learning, and they are generally quick to forgive. With guidance and trust, they welcome those who are different, as they become cognizant of their many similarities. Digging a trench in a sandbox is much more fun with a buddy. You don't need to speak the same language or come from the same neighborhood to play a game of chase. Laughter, like tears, is so much better shared.

For the adults that are privileged with the opportunity to be involved in Children's Peacemaking, it is well to remember that it is guaranteed to be an exhilarating, exhausting and enlightening endeavor. It is much easier to teach peace when all the "isms" have not yet been internalized. Each of us (teacher and student alike) needs to know that we are beautiful in the sight of God, but not any more beautiful than our neighbor.

Remembering an almost five-year-old, who told me that she needed to know about "stuff like cooperation and negotiation before I go to kindergarten," I am very aware of the plethora of joys and hopes children discover and share about many things, including peacemaking. After all, children of any race, gender, ability, sexuality or economic position seek the peace of affirmation and love — just like the rest of us older children.

**Practice for Peacemakers:** Find a stash of crayons in your home or order a box of 64. Collect some paper for your creation. Light a candle, put on some peaceful music and begin. Choose a

crayon and doodle, draw or simply move a crayon across the page with light strokes. Think about the movement of your hand and what an awesome creation it is, while contemplating the wonders of which this color reminds you. Perhaps write words using an orange crayon (pumpkin, fall leaves, a harvest moon, the peace of a campfire). When you are ready, change to another color. Continue until your papers are full or you have run out of crayon colors. Take five deep breaths and say, “Amen!”

**Prayer:** Amazing God, wrap all of your children in the comfort of peace. Help us imagine and create ways to be a good neighbor. Forgive us when we are quick to judge, and help us muddle through the misinformation we devour. Remind us of the joy of children, and encourage us at all ages to play (maybe with a five-year-old). Amen.



Now retired, Suzanne Gangemi most recently served as director of family life ministry at Mountain Rise UCC in Fairport, NY. Much of her career was focused on building programming centered on helping children to grow into their calling as peacemakers.



**Tuesday, September 15**

Making Peace in Relationships

**Restoring Peace in the Classroom**

*Rachael Eggebeen*

James 1:19

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (NIV)*

Matthew 18:15

*“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.” (NIV)*

**Reflection:** In a middle school classroom, relationships built on respect are the number one predictor of student success. Teachers who prioritize building relationships tend to have students who are more willing to try new skills, and those students tend to have higher test scores. On the other hand, students who do not feel like their teacher supports them will often shut down. At the middle school age, even the slightest indifference can destroy a relationship, whether between two friends or between student and staff member. “Restorative conferences” hosted by school counselors can play a key role in building those relationships effectively, and in rebuilding relationships that may falter over the school year.

This fall, I had an extremely talkative class. If I paused to breathe while giving instructions, my students would start talking. As the first quarter progressed, I knew that something had to change. I was at a point where it seemed like the only ways forward were either applying whole-class punishments or taking the time to build a trusting relationship with each of the talkers. I chose to build relationships.

Each week, I focused on getting to know a new talker. An important part of building the relationship was letting them tell me why they like to talk. In time, they started to understand

when it was appropriate to talk. We devised different methods to remind them of when to be quiet. One student asked that I just say his name and motion to be quiet. Another student, who sat near the front, asked that I simply tap his desk and motion to be quiet. Another student asked that I pull my ear and motion to be quiet.

What does this have to do with restorative conferences — what does that even mean? Well, it means a mediated conversation (in this case, between student and teacher) that gives a chance for two people to clearly and privately express and reconcile their concerns. For example, one student felt picked on because I often called her name and asked her to be quiet. She felt that I was targeting her when others were also talking.

My student asked our counselor to lead a restorative conference with me, and one was scheduled. My student was able to share her feelings. I was able to share that not all redirection is verbal. I asked her to notice where I stand in the classroom (in front or near a student), and I asked her to watch my motions when I was addressing the class.

The counselor asked my student if not talking during instructions was a fair expectation for her and the entire class. The student was able to come to an agreement with me about how I could remind her to not talk during instructions. We agreed that I could call her name and ask her to be quiet. This worked the best, as she sat in the back of the classroom and wanted to know why I was calling her name. We also agreed that I would try to use a lower voice level so it would appear to be a conversation between us and differentiate learning from behavior redirection.

The result of this conversation was immediate. My student still liked to talk, but she was now aware of how I worked to meet the needs of every student. The number of reminders my student needed was reduced over the semester. More importantly, she and I were developing a solid relationship built on respect. In the spring, my student's schedule was changed in a schoolwide reorganization, but she and I would still check in with each other — all because of one restorative conference.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** When you next come into conflict at the workplace, at church or in school, take a step back before jumping into action. Discern whether there is a space in which you can resolve the conflict constructively. Prepare for this situation by asking yourself: “Is there a trusted third party who can help to mediate and de-escalate the tensions in each of these areas of my life?” If not, keep watch for people with the training and emotional maturity to help perform these vital functions responsibly.

***Prayer:*** Dear God, we give you thanks for good teachers and school counselors. Help us to remember your call to extend grace, even in person-to-person confrontations. Whether as educators, friends, parents or as colleagues, may we be granted the patience to seek common

denominators when disagreements get in the way of communication. In the name of Jesus, our teacher of your Way, Amen.



Rachael Eggebeen has taught middle school social studies for seven years and served as co-chair of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). She is also a member of the PC(USA)’s “Educate a Child” team.



**Wednesday, September 16**

Making Peace in Relationships

**Walking Together on the Path to Peace**

*Rachel Anderson*

Luke 10:1

*After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.*

**Reflection:** Road trip! Travel may be more fun with friends. Facing the unknown may be smoother with a companion. Engaging potential hostilities may be safer with partners. Let's face it: living life in general is often not fun, smooth or safe. Often when we aspire to step into the justice and mercy of God, we find instead discontentment, embarrassment or insecurity. And so, as we do the hard work of building peace in our community and abroad, Jesus calls us into partnership with each other.

Jesus sends his friends out like sheep among wolves, with none of the items that might make us believe we are secure: an emergency fund, a well packed suitcase or our favorite snacks. Instead, he says all we need is another by our side. Within a local congregation, we find the relationships that work for peace. We are a people, individually and communally, who have received God's compassion. As such, we are called to become a people of peace, dedicated to justice. Our congregations provide us practicums in peacemaking. In relationships, we can stand as we cannot on our own.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh, he always stood with another (see Exodus, from chapter 4 onward). When he stood alone and struck the rock, ego got in the way of God's work (Numbers 20). There is comfort in not being alone. But there is more than comfort: there is a space for self-examination and growth. It is in the context of authentic relationships, the sacred space and bond between people, that we are best able to engage our own internal work. Creating and sustaining those honest, challenging relationships is a core way in which the church joins God in transforming us into people of God's peace.



Jesus sends us together.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** Identify a congregation member or other friend with whom you are willing to share your internal spiritual challenges. Begin praying together at least once a week.

***Prayer:*** Compassionate God, let our relationships create the space for our transformation into people of peace, that we may rededicate ourselves and our communities to be sanctuaries of justice.



Rachel Anderson serves in Louisville, KY, as mission specialist for the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.



**Thursday, September 17**

Peace in Relationships

**“This Person is a Beloved Child of God!”**

*Rev. Erin Dickey*

1 John 3:2

*Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** Growing up in southern Louisiana, and then going to college and seminary in Texas, has led me to become very familiar with the saying, “Bless Your Heart!” You likely know this saying, too. It is often used as a way to express pity for someone — usually with irony. A fellow minister once joked that the “church” version of this is to say to someone, “Oh, they’re a beloved child of God!” when the name or words they’d like to use are far less affirming.

But what if — what if, with every person we met, our first thought about them was a sincere, “*This person is a beloved child of God!*” How would our interactions, our first impressions, our ongoing conversations change if we took the time to say about each person we meet, “This person is a beloved child of God!” As we seek ways to bring about peace in our relationships — our friendships, spouses/partners, colleagues, neighbors and strangers — perhaps one way to begin is by first seeing them as beloved, as a child of God, as someone who shares the peace of Christ.

In a time when we so desperately need the peace of Christ, let us see one another through eyes of compassion, acknowledging that each person we meet, each relationship we nurture and sustain, is part of a covenant with God’s beloved children. When we finally see one another through the lens of God’s perspective, how can we live in anything other than peace?

**Practice for Peacemakers:** You know what to do! For the next few days, try to start your conversations and meetings with one internal thought: “*This person is a beloved child of God!*” Let that thought peel away initial feelings of resentment and worry, and drive you to interact with the grace and appreciation that is shown to each of God’s children.

*Prayer:* Dear God, sometimes folks seem so rude, destructive or out of the loop that we can forget their connection to You. Other times, our own biases get in the way. Help us to see past superficial differences, and even past character flaws, to get at the holy potential at the heart of each person we meet. And in so doing, help us to build peace in our relationships with those around us.



The Rev. Erin Dickey serves as senior pastor to Riverside Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Riverside-Avondale, FL.



**Friday, September 18**

Peace in Relationships

**Practicing Words of Peace**

*Rev. Martha Koenig Stone*

Mark 10:13–16

*People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** My mother was a fount of wisdom. Whatever my questions or worries, I could come to her for information and opinions, comfort and challenge. One memory stands out: She often said that “the hardest thing you have to learn is *how to get along with other people.*”

I’ve spent my whole life trying to do that, but like the rest of the world, I have a long way to go. I remember a time when my own children were small: the day had been long, we were all hungry and I was struggling to put supper on the table. I could feel the tension rising as the kids played in the next room, but I didn’t have the energy to go and settle one more argument. I tried to ignore the increasing volume.

Then the angry words began. I don’t remember what it was about, but I remember the desperation I felt. In a last-ditch effort to intervene without leaving the kitchen, I found myself shouting out a phrase they had practiced using at their daycare center: “Kind words and gentle touches!” “*Yeah, right,*” I thought to myself. “*That’s not gonna work.*”

For a moment though, they settled down! I had little hope that the peace would last, but we made it safely to bedtime.

To this day, I am profoundly grateful for the dedicated teachers who nurtured my children, for the tender example they set, and for the habits of respect for others and self-control they cultivated. And I wonder, “What would this world be like if every child had high-quality schools, patient and gracious mentors, plentiful food, safe beds, a vision of a world filled with kindness and gentleness and ample time to practice their peacemaking skills?”

Only when we learn how to live in concert with one another will God's realm of peace be complete. Jesus invites us to sit at his feet with our questions and concerns. Then he sends us out to "practice, practice, practice" the Way of Peace. I'm still working on it.

**Action:** Think of a time when you experienced a conflict that ended peacefully — with your kids, co-workers, a stranger or perhaps on the world stage. What words were spoken that helped those involved to step back from the brink? How can you apply those words to conflicts in the future?

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for letting us kids come and talk with you, and for never giving up on us! Show us how to talk with each other, too, and how to listen better. Give us patience to keep working on getting along, because we're going to need a lot of practice! Amen.



The Rev. Martha Koenig Stone is a UCC pastor who has served local churches for 25 years, currently serving at Henrietta United Church of Christ, near Rochester, NY. She chairs the N.Y. Conference UCC Commission on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and co-chairs the UEK Forum, a denominational task force that attends to the UCC's partnership with the Protestant church in Germany. A former foreign-language teacher, she is passionate about work that brings together people of varied ages and backgrounds.



**Saturday, September 19**

Peace in Relationships

**Making Peace with Humility**

*Thea Koenig Burton*

Acts 28:27

*‘For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.’ (NRSV)*

**Reflection:** “Have you ever won an argument? Really won an argument: not just worn down the other person to the point where they say, ‘*Fine, you win,*’ but actually changed that person’s mind enough that they agreed with you?”

This was the question from my minister’s sermon last week, and it got me thinking about conflict, where it comes from and how we resolve it. When we argue, it is because we think we are right, and we want to be heard? Perhaps we are afraid of losing control of our own life, or afraid of change. At the same time, we are forgetting that the other person thinks they are right, they want to be heard, and perhaps they are afraid of losing control — afraid of change.

The lyrics from Sondheim’s “Into the Woods” remind us:

*People make mistakes holding to their own, thinking they're alone. Honor their mistakes.  
Fight for their mistakes. Everybody makes one another's terrible mistakes. Just  
remember: Someone is on your side, someone else is not. While we're seeing our side,  
maybe we forgot: They are not alone. No one is alone.*

It’s important, as peacemakers, to have enough humility to remember that we, too, are fallible. When having an argument, what would happen if each person stopped and asked themselves, “What if *I’m* wrong? What if *I* am in need of healing?”

If each of us did that, the argument might cease; a dialogue might begin. When I give up my need to be the arbiter of truth myself, that leaves more room to recognize shared Truth and realize a state of harmony. The motto of our church is, “*You are not alone.*” I think of it both as a comfort and a challenge to remain connected, to name evil when I see it and to keep the dialogue going, knowing that no one is alone.

***Practice for Peacemakers:*** Prepare yourself to be wrong. Sometime in the next few days, it is bound to happen. When it does, don’t shy away from the moment. Embrace your inevitable human fallibility, and let both God’s grace and correction from those around you guide you toward the truth of that moment. Finally, always remember: Doing this once is easy; doing it consistently is a life’s worth of humble learning.)

***Prayer:*** Dear God, we know that there are times when you call us to speak truth to power, and others when you call us to listen and learn. Help us to approach the work of peacemaking with humility, grace and an open mind.



Thea Koenig Burton is a speech-language pathologist, a community theatre actor/director and the founder of the Wolfville Theatre Collective. She has been a contributor to Christian education curriculum for the UCC and the periodical “These Days.” Thea is currently the volunteer children’s Sunday School music/drama facilitator for Orchard Valley United Church, New Minas, Nova Scotia.