

**Be the Peace**  
**ASP Welcome Home Service**  
**June 23, 2019**  
**1 Samuel 25:6, John 14:27; Philippians 4:8-9**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**

Today I want to talk about 2 three-letter words....the first isn't in English....and is three simple letters....  
S...L...M.

We're not exactly sure how to pronounce this word the way the first people that wrote it did....but there are two very popular modern ways to say it....Shalom....and Salaam.

If we were to reduce it to one word, Shalom might be translated as Peace. But it could also be translated as "Wholeness."

For the ancient world....and particularly the ancient world that gave rise to Judaism, Christianity and Islam....Shalom, Salaam....wasn't just about the absence of war, it was, as one religious scholar (W. Brueggemann) has put it, "the flourishing wholeness of creation into the purposes of God....It means peace and justice—peaceable life together among the nations and tribes and religious traditions, and economic justice so that everybody has enough resources to live a life of safety and dignity."

This week, we were invited by the ASP leadership and staff to "Be the Peace....to be the Shalom" for the families we would meet and for the world. I know that is what we tried to be and do.

So just what does "being the peace....being the shalom....being agents of peace and justice" look like?

It's helping a man who is proudly striving to pay off his mortgage, so his son's future is more secure with property, make his home more livable....dry and safe.

It's honoring a master gardener farmer, whose generosity fed over 70 of us delicious Lois Wall coleslaw at the picnic, by making his home warmer, safer and dryer....

It's completing a ramp for a dear woman who not too many years ago had her former home on the hill destroyed by a storm....allowing her to come and go from her home with safety and security....

It's securing the outside of several homes, so the families don't have to worry about what is under their homes or coming through....

It's working to shore up a sagging home so that it is safer and can provide a home for years to come....

But more than all of that....it's getting to know and love the people who live in the 19 homes we worked on...it's learning to respect them and listen to them and honor their stories, their challenges and their dreams.

Shalom is not something any one of us can possess and it's not something any of us can truly claim until all of us can claim it....but we can see pockets of it. And we did this past week as we all became not the people who had come to fix the house....but as we embodied what Paul and others call....a relationship ministry with a little carpentry on the side.

In the week we were gone we were within moments of going to war with Iran....the storms that brought us rain most days continued to devastate farmers across the breadbasket of our nation, as muddy fields have not yet been planted, and international disputes put their markets at risk, not just now, but potentially for years to come....and a whole lot of people who want to continue to be or become president said a lot of unflattering things about one another.

If ever there was a time when we needed those glimpses of shalom it is now.

And I have to tell you....both those of you who went....and those of you who are their church, their supporters, their parents, their siblings....

You blew me away....time and again....on my team and on others....I saw and heard the effort....the desire to get the job done as well as it could be done so that these wonderful folks we were growing to love and care for could be even more proud of the homes they already loved and cherished....

I saw and heard the respect....the way these young people lived out one of the creeds of ASP that's printed on the cover of your bulletins...."We accept people right where they are, as they are." I saw it when Wynne and Jessica and Claire and Will B and Will O all took special pains to create opportunities for the two youngest children in our family to help out....driving nails or measuring wood or drawing the cut lines on the vinyl with the T-square.

I saw it when my leadership partner Kathy sweated and squelched her way through Friday with Claire to get the last of the underpinning finished. I saw it in the tired, yet shining faces of team after team who didn't just have a job to do....but had people to care for....to work for and with....to help their homes match the dignity and kindness and generosity of the people who lived within them....

I saw it everywhere....even back at the center....helpful comments, friendly games of Euchre and Squares and Gin....conversations over dinner or early morning coffee, or over the sudsy water of doing dishes or the bleachy spray of cleaning the bathrooms....there was a togetherness....a common purpose....a desire to know and share and be with that is at the heart of Shalom....at the starting point of peace.

That's the first word....the word uttered by Christ as a gift, by Paul as the defining characteristic of God....Shalom....

And then there is the second word....

Also three letters....

M....U....D.

OKAY...TMI moment of the sermon....

Last night, after my first indoor shower in a week, I did that thing you aren't really supposed to do...but I dipped a Q-tip in alcohol and gently cleaned just the outer part of my ears...the parts I couldn't reach before...and there it was....several states and more than a full day since I last encountered it....

MUD.

It's still stubbornly there under one fingernail try as I might....

A lot of us in both counties had to deal with mud this week. It was silly, slippery, sometimes smelly and, so sadly for our beloved Ginger, dangerous, as it turns out.

As we did our underpinning this week, we couldn't help notice that here and there were telltale signs of where we dropped that piece, or rested it on the ground as one of the Colonels crouched in or sat right down on the muddy ground to get it in the right position....mud splatters were here and there....some caused by us, some by the rain that arrived and departed more times than a Metra train at rush hour....

And we worried about it....we wanted it beautiful and pristine....and the family assured us, once the ground dried up, they were going to power wash it....

What a nice thought....that all the smudges will be removed, and it will shine brilliantly....for a little while anyway.

I think about mud this week not just because it seemed to be almost everywhere, but because it's a sign of something both spiritual and practical.

We are human beings. Nothing we do is perfect. Ever. And we live in a world that is so often mud-spattered.

There's a reason that religious traditions developed the concept of our need to be made clean, because so often even with the best of intentions....even with the greatest efforts....things get splattered with mud....or at least a little dusty with shades of grey.

We worked this week in two counties that traditionally have depended on coal as a, or, the main source of employment....though it has been more than a generation since that was reality.

The world is changing, the needs of the world are changing and too often, Appalachia has been the one to suffer for it....When we wanted coal in the railroad era and the early days of electricity and home heat....they had jobs, but no ability to acquire capital because all of the people who owned the coal mostly lived outside of the region....so the coal left, and the money left, and when natural gas became more portable and cleaner and concerns about greenhouse gasses began to rise....the jobs left too.

It's easy to be anti-coal in 2019....but all of us have learned, it's never easy to be anti-miner....or anti-coal company employee....because these are decent, hardworking people whose shot at the economic justice part of shalom has had a lot of mud thrown at it in the last couple of decades....

We also have seen in little ways how even our best work and intentions can splatter a bit....

This week I saw a perfectly innocent comment by a volunteer be interpreted by a child as an insult....and pride welled up with hurt feelings that were soothed by more kind words of explanation, and listening and time....It brought home how difficult it must be to receive help, and how important building relationships is to this process. When we know one another's hearts we can forgive....we can together wipe the splatters of mud away.

In the traditions of the three religions who use that Shalom/Salaam word....we call those splattered places in our lives that are of our own making sin....and all of our traditions speak of God's will that we be freed from those places. It is a source of great joy and great hope that when we get it wrong so often, Elohim, God, Allah is there to wipe away both the tears and the stains. Even those of no religious tradition can understand the importance of a fresh start....a clean slate....

When you do underpinning....I learned this week....it's important to keep the panels perfectly vertical or the house looks tilted. But inevitably, things go wonky....maybe just because the house is built that way or the track you're hanging it from is a bit wonky....whatever the reason....every once in a while....as the amazing young people on our team demonstrated time and again....every once in a while, you have to have multiple sets of hands working together, one pulling the top that way, one pulling the bottom that way, and one driving the nails to hold everything in place. It takes work to keep things lining up as they should.

None of us can know either the seeds of hope we have planted this week, or the places we have left a bit askew that will require other hands to straighten....or even the splatters we may have caused....but if we are secure in our intention....to build relationships, to care beyond 7 days, to make the world a better place for our having been in it....we can also live in the hope that love itself, or the source of it....can be the straightening hand....the power-washer we need. Some call that grace.

We know that we need to be a part not just of meeting the needs we helped work on this last week, but to be inspired by our relationships, to be a part of solving the greater problems and challenges facing our nation and that region in particular.

Our goal is Shalom....this week, we gave our sweat, our time, our hearts, in some cases a bone or two....to create with our families little pockets of peace, of justice, of wholeness....

Now may we dedicate ourselves to seeing where and how we can create those same pockets in our homes, our community, in all the regions of our nation, and ultimately in the world.

It only happens one heart, one hammer, one commitment at a time....

Thank you for the commitments you have made so far....

Together let's see where God, the one who is peace incarnate, is calling us next to be the peace....not just for us, but for all. Seeing what you've already done, I can't wait for what's next!