

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Proper 19 (A) ~ 13 September 2026  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Exodus 14:19-31  
Psalm 114  
Matthew 18:21-35

## **Becoming a People of *Shalom***

Good morning, Beloved People of God!

I have the most exquisite vantage point from which to look out at this beautiful community of faith, gathered here in the Nave at St. Dunstan's for the first time since June. This is, indeed, a sight for sore eyes! As you may have heard me say, we are never *exactly* the same constellation of folks from one week to the next; it's a next body every time. And yet: We still are the Body of Christ. We are all the Church.

Do me a favor, would you? I'd be grateful if you would turn to the person next to you, or in front of or behind you, and greet them with the ancient Hebrew word, *Shalom*.

Would you do that for me?

Thank you so much.

I'm married to a Southerner, and in our house we have a plaque in our entryway that says, *Shalom, y'all!*

Shalom, y'all!

*Shalom*, like *aloha* in Hawaii, is one of those dual-purpose words that culturally means both “hello” and “goodbye.”

When we hear *shalom*, we may think immediately of its common translation, “peace.” In Judaism, the traditional greeting when seeing someone for the first time or when seeing someone you haven't seen in a long time is, *Shalom Aleichem*, which means “peace unto you.”

But it also conveys completeness, safety, welfare, health, and prosperity, so what we're really saying when we wish another person *shalom* is

*May you be whole, and may nothing be missing in your life.*

I cannot think of a better way to greet our siblings in Christ on this new day at the beginning of this new week at the start of a new program year together.

*May you be whole, and may nothing be missing in your life.*

Let's reflect on what this suggests for us gathered here this morning.

What does it mean to be *whole*?

What does it mean to be *complete*?

What does it mean for nothing to be missing in our lives?

Is it about “stuff”? She or he who dies with the most toys, wins?

Doubtful. Our possessions may be comforting, but they also can weigh us down. They can become a weight around our necks, preventing us from travelling lightly through this world.

Recently my dear, dear children have launched a campaign (“intervention” may be a better word...) to try to get me to pare down some of my library. They are convinced that no books are missing in my life. If you've been in my office, you

know they aren't wrong. I see their point. (I'm still not going to do anything about it.)

But I digress.

To be whole, to be complete, for nothing to be missing from our lives isn't about "things."

It isn't about having "enough."

We rarely, if ever, think we have enough, do we? My bookshelves can attest to that.

To live in *shalom* also isn't just about being peaceful, or avoiding conflict.

Good luck with that.

One trip around the beltway at rush hour and that aspiration is shot.

No, to live in *shalom* is not one-sided. We cannot do it alone.

We need one another to be whole. We were created for community.

If you would, I'd love for you to turn to the "Thought for the Day" on the inside cover of your service bulletin. Today's is from the renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman, who offers this biblical vision of what completeness looks like. He writes:

If there is to be well-being, it will not be just for the isolated, insulated individuals; it is, rather, security and prosperity granted to a whole community – young and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependent. Always we are all in it together. Together we stand before God's blessings, and together we receive the gift of life, if we receive it at all. Shalom comes only to the inclusive, embracing community that excludes none.

*Always we are all in it together.*

This, friends, is *God's* aspiration for us.

It is our purpose, our true mission in our world and in our neighborhood.

But as we know, that mission doesn't just *happen*. It requires intentionality, and curation, and commitment.

Jonathan Sacks, who for many years was Chief Rabbi for the UK, talks about this commitment in terms of *covenant*: a mutual, two-sided relationship that governs – and, I would say, enables – our life together. He distinguishes between a contract, on the one hand, and a covenant, on the other. He says that in a contract, “two or more people come together to make an exchange...which is to the benefit of the self-interest of each.” He uses the example of paying a plumber, but we might think about paying taxes, or paying for a club membership. Contracts are, by definition, transactional relationships, in which one party gives and expects to get in return.

By contrast, Rabbi Sacks explains, a covenant is

more like a marriage than an exchange...A covenant isn't about me; it's about us. A covenant isn't about interests; it's about identity.<sup>1</sup>

So much of what we do in life is transactional – from finishing our homework so that we will get good grades or doing our jobs so that we will get paid. These exchanges are necessary for daily life. We must attend to our own needs at a basic level: It's like putting on our oxygen mask before helping someone else.

But these exchanges are also *contingent*: We only get the “goodies” if we live up to our part of the bargain. There's no grace, no abundance. It's *quid pro quo* (this for that).

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/2017-irving-kristol-award-recipient-rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-remarks/>

The problem is that we can become so focused on our own interests that we forget, or cut ourselves off from, one another.

We need each other, with all our differences of background, worldview, and opinion, in order to be whole.

We cannot be complete in isolation.

It is impossible to live in *shalom* by ourselves.

This is the message of our readings this morning, each of which emphasizes our collective, covenantal, identity.

In Exodus, for example, God delivers *Israel* – as a People – from enslavement in Egypt. The text does not say that God leads 600,000 disparate individuals through the Red Sea.

So, too, in the psalm, the people become “God’s sanctuary” in the world, the place where God dwells. God is not confined to a building, remote and hidden, but rather is present in and among the community, loosed in the world.

Likewise, in the Gospel, Jesus challenges the impulse to hurt those who have hurt us. Some context may be helpful here: When Jesus tells Peter to forgive “seventy times seven” times, that is code that Matthew’s audience would have understood. It echoes the “Song of Vengeance” in Genesis, where Lamech, a descendant of Cain (the Bible’s first murderer), declares that if anyone strikes him, he will be avenged – he will strike back – “seventy-sevenfold.”

But Jesus says, “By no means! Violence and vengeance are not of God! You are to be people of love and mercy and forgiveness.” For Jesus, wholeness, *shalom*, requires understanding that we are, collectively, the People of God. We are part of something far bigger than ourselves, and we are called to work to heal whatever divides us from one another.

So what does all this mean for us, on this “Welcome Home” Sunday? I realize that for some this may sound like strange language, because we haven’t “left home”; we haven’t gone anywhere.

Fair point.

For others, it may seem odd to be welcomed “home” because you are visiting for the first time today or are still trying to decide whether this Church thing really is for you.

Also fair. More than fair, actually; it is to be expected. It makes sense to be cautious and discerning about where you hang our hat, so to speak.

But far more important than *where* you find your home with God is *that* you find your home with God, among the People of God, God’s sanctuary here on earth – regardless of who is here or isn’t here. We still are the Body of Christ. We are all the Church.

We *all* belong to God – and we belong to one another.

That truth is not contingent; it is not about things done or left undone. It isn’t about how many Sundays we show up, or don’t.

It is about our identity as beloved and forgiven. It’s about God’s abundant grace.

Always we are all in it together.

So, *Shalom*, y’all!

Welcome home, friends.

May you be whole, and may nothing be missing in your life.

*Amen.*