

Do Peace
Sermon Text Matthew 5: 1-12
Isaiah 11:1-9; Psalm 29

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be call sons of God.

I had the great privilege of be trained in philosophy Jesuit priest. Dr. McGowan taught us to pay particular attention to every word in a text and he demanded that we write and speak with precision. Every word mattered to him and he instilled that into his students. This lesson is particularly important when reading the Scriptures. Pay attention to every word.

This certainly holds true in the Beatitudes. In the peacemaker Beatitude it is not blessed are those who are at peace, or who have peace. Jesus did not say blessed are those who have perfect peace but blessed are the peacemakers, the ones who work at peace; those who make peace. These are the people who often times experience little peace and their earthly reward is usually ridicule for the little and death to the great.

Peace is active. Jesus is saying blessed are those who look evil in the eye and work to eradicate it. To do peace, get busy; and in this world there is no lack of opportunity.

So if peace is active; what does peace activity look like? How do we do peace? First we have to do what does not come naturally to most of us today. We live in a let's do it now, knee jerk reaction world. But I propose that the first thing that we do when we do peace is – pray; pray about peace, for peace, and discernment. Then we have to begin the great conversation. The dark lord in the *Harry Potter* series is so evil that he is known as “he who must not be named.” In our post 9/11 world we have become so hardened that not only do we not think and talk much about peace but it is almost a dirty word – we’ll have peace when we have killed all of our enemies. Even in church where we follow, at least with our words, the Prince of Peace, we are reticent to talk about peace. We place peace with the dark lord in Harry Potter we will not even name it. We speak only of politics, victory, and safety.

As the first Gulf War opened in 1991, a war that I believe was a “just war” under Augustine’s theology, but still a war, three clergy were interviewed on the McNeil-Lehrer Hour. Two declared, “God is with us, we must win!” The third opened his Bible and read aloud about Jesus, “Love your enemies, Blessed are the peacemakers ...” he was abruptly

interrupted by the clergy next to him yelling at him, "That's not relevant now! We're at war!" He yelled. The reply, "If it's not relevant now, it's never relevant."

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. Not my words, Jesus' blame him.

Jesus lived in a time of peace. Caesar Augustus boasted of countless achievements, the grandest of which was the *Pax Romana*. If anyone in the empire raised either voice or hand then iron boot of the Roman army would quickly stomp it out. There was peace in the Soviet Union for nearly 70 years. Oh occasionally in places like Hungary resistance would rise up only to be met by the second greatest military might on the planet. Caesar's peace, the Soviet Union's peace was no peace because they had enough weapons to point at the citizens and keep them as slaves. Peace is not the absence of war particularly when war is shoved aside by bullying threats.

Genuine peace is deeper, richer, more full of life. Peace lets people be free as children made in the image of God. Free to be the people God made them to be. The Old Testament vision of peace is *shalom*. The word means more than peace, it speaks to the total wellbeing of the person and society. It speaks of the well off and the poor, the agile and the slow of step, the brilliant mind and the dullard. Shalom is about justice – living out God's kingdom, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth and it is in heaven."

How do those of us who want to be peacemakers make peace? How do we think and pray about peace? Peace labors long and hard and we begin by thinking and praying. Hitler once said, "It is fortunate for leaders when the people do not think." Blessed are those who think, especially those who think about peace and truth.

Peacemakers strive for truth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *No Rusty Swords*, "There can only be ... peace when it does not rest on lies and injustice." Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth ..." to be next to Jesus requires that we be ruthless seekers of truth. Right up front in the Book of Order of our beloved denomination we declare that one of the six Great Ends of the Church is "the preservation of the truth." But we live in a world that lives on *political spin*; we believe every harmful thing said about those with whom we may disagree. We have trampled civility and grace while lies and half-truths are our regular bill-o-fare, increasingly being fueled by internet babble. We hear so much spin and ideology by the talking heads on both the left and the right in this

country that we are all becoming cynics. We no longer even expect the truth. In George Orwells' 1984, the Ministry of Truth declared that "War is peace, ignorance is strength, lies become truth; every year our range of consciousness grows a little smaller."

The truth is the truth and those who work for peace stare down lies and when the truth hurts – it is still the truth. The conflicts that rage and tears apart the fabric of humanity, the injustice that persists must be confronted with the truth. We have witness such in our life time; with profound wisdom and uncommon courage, South African leaders determined that the only way to move beyond their past and to move forward as a nation was to face their past. So they form the "Truth and Reconciliation" commission. All over the country victim and perpetrator told their stories. Women who had watched their husbands dragged from their beds in the middle of the night and murdered in front of their eyes told of their agony. The agents of the state who had carried out those orders admitted their guilt. Truth had its day and the healing of a nation began.

Jesus stood before Pilate, the religious authorities, who confronted by the truth sought to extinguish the light of the world and the bearer of truth. Pilate asked a question, "What is truth?" This is where we disagree. In the church we wrestle, as well we should with that question. In society we wrestle with the question; yet, we have thrown off the mantle of civility in our debate and embraced a rancor that is unbecoming a civilized people. We see the yard sign in our neighbor's yard different from ours and we think them to be numbskulls. We have forgotten how to disagree. In a democracy we ought to be able to disagree with each other without vilifying each other or worst shooting each other.

We must learn to listen to each other and understand the other without trashing each other. I wonder what would happen to the level of debate if we prayed for those with whom we disagreed. God made us all in God's image – liberal and conservative; democrat and Republican; universal health care, single payer advocate and foe. Learning how to disagree is a giant step forward in making peace. I challenge each of you this week to pick out one person with whom you disagree and pray for that person and yourself. Pray that you will understand where that person is coming from.

"No Justice, No Peace" that was what was printed on the bumper sticker. I am not much on bumper sticker theology, but I have to agree with that one. There was peace in Czechoslovakia before

November 17, 1989; but there was no justice. Lies had become truth. Free expression was not permitted. Dissidents were hauled off in the night never to be heard from again. But the voice of the poet, a speaker of truth, a voice almost whispering the truth resonated with the people. The voice spoke through the lies and spoke the poetry of freedom and justice. The people who longed for these took to the streets, the iron boot of the Soviet Union had become rusty, unable to stomp as it once had. Soon the few grew into thousands and then 200,000 so many that the state could not resist their demands for justice and truth. The authoritarian government yielded to the *Velvet Revolution* and a poet, Vaclav Havel became the president of a free people on December 29, 1989.

The biblical vision of *shalom* presumes justice. But the notion is not simply singular. It is not peace for a person but for a people. One person cannot sustain peace, only a people can. The Hebrew Bible our Old Testament speaks that when the poorest in the community are cared for then the sunlight of justice has shown forth. Corrie ten Boom once said that a society would be judge by how they treated the most vulnerable among them – generally the old and the poor. When the Bible demands that we care for the widow and the orphan and the stranger in our midst; it is demanding that we speak the truth when they are wronged and that we demand justice for those that cannot effectively speak for themselves. Peace making demands that Christians work tirelessly for justice in society. None can be free if one is shackled by the chains of injustice.

Look around you this week. Slow down and see. Drive to a nursing home in the poorer part of our community. Go inside, look around and listen to the voice of Corrie ten Boom. Listen to the voice of Jesus, “when you have done it to the least of these ...”

Peace is not passive; it is not easy. It demands courage. Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” Jesus said, “Love your neighbors.” He demonstrated both in one of his best stories, the story of the Samaritan. Here was a person, hated and despised by the Jews and the feeling was mutual. The Samaritan picks up the person he dreads the most a Jew; and he loves the unlovable. He makes peace in a concrete and risky but healing action. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the heart of the peacemaker Beatitude:

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of

enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up.¹

God loves us and his love living in us can transform enemies into friends. He gives us no choice but to love our enemies and pray for them. Love is why violence cannot deliver the peace it promises.

Sometimes the circumstances of nations demand actions that seem contrary to what we have said. I believe that the first Gulf War was a just war, a war that stood up against evil. It sent a raging dog back home. It liberated a country. Yet, it ended nothing. The conflict in the region rages; it has escalated. Ironically, when the former president decided that we must preemptively strike at Iraq in the current war, and his secretary of defense declared, "We will be greeted as liberators and children will place flowers in our rifles" the only member of his inner circle to speak forcefully against the action was also the only member to have ever been in a war. He had witnessed the horror of war first hand. The other had watched war movies. Today, thousand upon thousands have died because of an ideology of terror and hate was met by war and hate. It is not working, there is a better way.

Another irony is that there is a person who has no religious training or professed religious convictions that was showing the way. Greg Mortenson was building schools and winning friends for this country in the very region where the al Queda now has a strong hold. Sadly, at the end of the movie *Charlie Wilson's War*, Congressman Wilson, a notorious drunkard and womanizer, argued for just \$5 million to build schools and hospitals in the same region. He was laughed at; it was easier to raise \$5 billion to fight our enemies than \$5 million to help build friendships.

Peter Story spoke these words at a 1976 commitment service for the South African Council of Churches on a Sunday:

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and Son of God, calls those who work for peace his brothers and sisters. Those who stand in a divided world, pointing the way to unity; those who live in a hateful world, demonstrating the way of love; those who share with Jesus the ministry of reconciliation; these are the people most closely related to him.²

¹ *Strength to Love*, 53

² *With God in the Crucible Preaching Costly Discipleship*, 29

By Wednesday bullets were flying in Soweto. Nearly 600 children were killed. So it goes for we who are peacemakers. We are reminded that in this last Beatitude that the going will not be easy. We live in a broken and fallen world, where we confuse selfish pride with self-interest; yet when our self interest is served all will enjoy Shalom. The Beatitudes are not about being happy as the world so trivially imagines happiness; the Beatitudes are about being faithful. Jesus said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God"*. And *"Well done thy good and faithful servant"*. Amen.