

Peace for All, All for Peace

Romans 12:9-21 Matthew 5:9

I suppose it was when I was a junior in high school, for American literature class, that I read “*To Kill a Mockingbird.*” As for anyone who reads it the first time, it is profoundly moving, as is, of course, the movie made in 1962. In one of the early scenes, a Mr. Cunningham--a farmer--comes to the back door to pay Atticus for some legal work. Mr. Cunningham is dirt poor. It’s the depression as well. And he has no money. So he has come to “pay” with what he as--a bag of pecans (which isn’t bad, but it isn’t cash). Scout is outside when he comes, and she goes running into the house yelling for Atticus to come out to see Mr. Cunningham. Atticus receives the pecans graciously.

That reminded me of another event I observed when riding with my father on his route for Covington Wholesale Co. When my father called on someone, they would both give him an order, and pay for the previous week’s order or sometimes for the month. Daddy would collect the amount and put it with the bill. On one occasion, I noticed that the amount on the bill was much more than what the man paid. After we left, I asked daddy about it. He said that that was all the man had at the time, and he would pay the rest when he could. Well, I thought he should’ve gotten the whole

amount! After we left, I asked why he was willing to take only part. Daddy said that what we did wasn't just a business. It was a service to others. It would all be all right. I had to think on that. Later upon reflection, I realized that my daddy didn't just view what he did as a job to earn money. It was position also in which to serve and help others in their lives as well. In other words, it was both a matter of servicing and a certain graciousness toward others.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God,*" (Mt 5:9). By the word "peace", he has in mind the Hebrew word SHALOM which does mean peace. But it means it in a fuller sense. Peace is not just the absence of conflict, but a full peace--the healthy, positive state of well-being. And when he speaks this beatitude, he pronounces "*blessed*" to those who not merely enjoy the fruits of peace, but those who give themselves to the difficult and challenging work of making peace between individuals, families, groups, and nations. "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" Jesus says, because as human beings we are never more like God-- "*the children of God*" --than when we act in forgiveness, graciousness, and seek nonviolent alternatives to hate and violence--making for a healthy, positive, state of well-being for all.

If I were to preach this beatitude in a safe, conventional manner, I

might emphasize the peace that Jesus brings to our inner lives. And certainly, Jesus brings that--an inner peace, an emotional peace, a spiritual peace, and peace of mind--all of those. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the Resurrection and said, "*Peace be to you,*" (Lk 24:36; Jn 20:21, 26), they needed to hear it. But that's not the only kind of peace he was about. Jesus is not just a personal Savior. He is the world's Savior, and we speak of him as the "Prince of Peace" for the world. In a world--our world--that seems drunk on hate and tearing itself apart in so many forms of hostility, the reign of the Risen Christ transcends the realm of the personal. Christ brings peace in the fullest sense of the word. This is how the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of the Christ to come. To expect anything less in our own time--and the implications that has for his followers--is to deny the reality and full intent of his reign on earth. So we must see this blessing in its world setting.

When Jesus was born, the ruler of the world was Caesar Augustus. Among his grand titles borne on Roman coins were "*Prince of Peace*" and "*Bringer of the World's Peace.*" In a sense--in the world's sense--it was true. The Roman Empire did bring a real kind of peace, but it was a peace founded--and maintained--on violence and the brutal crushing of all dissent. It was peace, but achieved by Roman wars and the cross as an

instrument of violence. The cross wasn't just a form of execution. It was a political statement by the Romans. It declared, "*Rome Rules the world.*"

The Peace of Rome was achieved by identifying others as enemies and fighting against them until they could no longer fight back. That's how the nations of this world act. But how did Christ give the world peace? By forgiveness. The Peace of Christ achieves peace by forgiving and reconciling enemies and embracing them as friends. The peace of the world attempts to give--without lasting success--is through violence and violent force. Christ gives peace--lasting peace--through forgiveness. As disciples of Christ, we are called to embrace forgiveness as the radical alternative to violence. The only way--Jesus says--to eliminate enemies is to love them, forgive them, and seek to reconcile them as friends. Impractical? Perhaps. But then you have to say Jesus Christ is impractical.

The followers of Jesus are called to be peacemakers by modeling the renunciation of violence in favor of forgiveness. This is exactly what Jesus did with the cross. He took the ultimate instrument of violence of its day and turned it into the ultimate emblem of forgiveness. It is not the peace of force or violence that Jesus gives the world. Caesar--and every other national power--including ours--did, and does that. Rather Christ's peace is the peace of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, that makes--or is willing

to make--the enemy a friend. When Jesus blesses the peacemakers--those who seek to bring peace in places of hostility--he is blessing those who make peace the way He makes peace. And we must constantly be asking ourselves, whose way of peacemaking do we really believe in--Caesar's way or Christ's way? The Roman way or the Christian way?

Now maybe we say Jesus just didn't face the kind of world we face. But if you don't take Rome's violence seriously, you're not getting it. But it wasn't just about Rome's violence he was speaking. No, it was to his own people. In that day, there were many--thousands--of Jews known as Zealots. They were militant revolutionaries who hoped to bring about God's kingdom on earth with violence. Such a way of improving their lot was especially attractive to the downtrodden and oppressed--what we might say in our day, the poor, working class folk and the less educated people among the Jews. They wanted to "*take their country back!*" The Zealots loved their people and their nation, and were ready and willing and would lay down their lives in warfare for the sake of Israel. Naturally, they saw themselves as loyal, patriotic "*sons/children of God.*" But Jesus says, "*NO! Blessed are the peacemakers; they are the children of God.*"

Our society is so saturated and prone toward violence to solve issues that people find it hard to believe in anything else. Many people trust

violence. Biblical support is easy to marshal. One can find any number of divinely sanctioned expressions of violence in the Bible, even-as described--divinely commissioned genocide. Jesus, however, while treating his sacred scriptures and traditions with respect, does not blindly accept every-thing in them without judgment. Jesus exposes the lie and deception of so-called “redemptive violence” when he grounds his teaching to love our enemies on the very nature and character of God (Mt 5:43-48). Jesus embodied a life of nonviolence through what he taught, how he lived, and especially in the way and manner in which he died. This is why the cross becomes the foundational symbol of the gospel of peace. Jesus bears the cruelty, animosity, and violence of the political and religious powers without returning them. Jesus would rather die than do violence to his enemies.

Peacemaking through nonviolence, however, does not involve being a “door-mat” as we say. When Jesus says, “*Don't resist an evil person*” he is not telling them to be a passive person. He means don't resist an evil person with violence. Don't do as done to. We read this in Paul's words: “*Never pay anyone evil for evil....Don't let evil conquer you. Rather, conquer evil with good,*” (Rom 12:17,21). And Jesus enumerates some creative ways to resist without violence, such as standing one's ground so to be hit again, yet

not merely succumb to the humiliation of being slapped, or by willingly carrying a Roman soldier's bag an additional mile, rather than putting it down after one (as according to Roman law, a soldier could require a non-citizen of Rome to carry it one mile). To resist nonviolently in such ways required/s both great moral strength and spiritual courage.

Further, peacemaking by nonviolence does not mean conflict avoidance. There are numerous times in the gospels when Jesus acts in defiance of the religious authorities, thus provoking conflict. Nonviolent peacemaking will sometimes elicit and provoke conflict as a way of exposing prejudice and injustice. This was a common strategy of the civil rights movements in the 1960s.

And it is not by accident that the final beatitude following this one is, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,"* (Mt 5:10). Peacemakers can be expected to be persecuted, but they are al-ways are looking for creative alternatives to violence. There may be times in self-defense that we have to resort to violent force, but disciples of Jesus should always be looking for creative ways to diffuse violence and make peace, even when it involves bearing the hate without returning it--the way Jesus did at the cross. It isn't always possible, but it is always incumbent upon us--as followers of Jesus--to avoid

violence when at all possible. The capacity to find creative non-violent alternatives to violence depends to some real degree on whether we practice non-violent responses in our everyday interactions with people over important or routine matters. Yet, we also need to take note that those things about which Jesus speaks here is not only about warfare and physical violence toward others. They also include--and most of the time what it is--is the violence of our words and attitudes toward others, our opposition to persons or other groups we view as different from ourselves. Peacemaking involves changes of attitudes and new dispositions, dispositions which are Christ-like. Two examples are the following:

Just hours after the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris, November 13, 2015, Ted Hakey of Meriden, CT, a retired Marine, slipped into drunken rage. Convinced that Muslims were inherently dangerous, and outraged at what happened, Hakey snapped. At around 2 p.m., he grabbed one of his high-powered rifles, pointed it out the window at a nearby mosque, and squeezed off several shots. Many of the bullets pierced the wall of the Baitul Aman--“House of Peace”--mosque, leaving holes where worshippers sat a few hours earlier.

After the shooting, he was arrested and charged with destruction of religious property, which is classified as a hate crime. As soon as the crime

was investigated, the officials of the mosque offered their forgiveness to the then-unnamed shooter. They were shocked to learn that the shooter lived nearby. “When we heard it was our neighbor, we said, ‘Where did we go wrong, not reaching out to our neighbors properly?’ A few weeks later, they got to ask Hakey themselves. Normally, hate crime cases involve a strict separation between victims and perpetrators, but the judge allowed Hakey the concession of allowing him to visit the mosque to apologize.

Tearing up, Hakey said, ‘I hope you can forgive me. I hope God can forgive me. I was drinking that night, and too much...As a neighbor, I did have fears, but fear is always when you don’t know something. The unknown is what you are always afraid of. I wish I had come knocked on your door, and if I spent five minutes with you, it would have made all the difference in the world. And I didn’t do that.’ The Muslim leaders surrounded Hakey and assured him of forgiveness. They said, ‘The Quran has within it something akin to ‘an eye for an eye,’ but it also says, ‘If your forgiveness brings about reformation in the person, then forgiveness is better. Reconciliation is better. The Quran says everybody deserves a second chance. This is the personification of the real values of Islam. This is what builds bridges. Its seeks to transform foes to friends.’ His words ‘melted our hearts,” said one of the mosque leaders. “He is...like a brother

to us now.” -- in the *Hartford Courant*, April 4, 2016. “*Blessed are the peacemakers...*” says Jesus.

Then, in Mississippi, the legislature this last week passed and the governor signed a law this week called “*the Religious Freedom bill.*” But Mitchell Moore at Campbell’s bakery in Jackson disagreed with the law as a Christian, and was asked about why. He responded: “*I am a Christian. I have a deeply held religious belief that I am here to serve. I am not here to decide whom to serve. We are open for everyone and always will be. We find HB1523 (the law) appalling and objectionable. We are whole heartedly against it and will fight it any way we can. We are called to serve, we are called to love. [Jesus said] ‘If we only love those who love us what credit is that to us?’ I love this state, my state, and I love her people. All of them. That’s what I am called to do.*”-- (on FB, Campbell’s Bakery, April 6, 2016). Mr. Moore nailed it. Just as Paul instructed the Christians in Philippi: “*Let everybody know how gentle and gracious you are,*” (4:5). So there is now the law of the State of Mississippi (and some similar elsewhere). But we are called to a higher law, the law of love, “*For you shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” (Jesus in Mark 12:31; Paul in Galatians 5:14)

Perhaps, Mitchel Moore was thinking also of Jesus’ words, “*For the*

Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life for many...”

said Jesus. We who follow him in his way are to follow in this way. You see, if we are really involved in peacemaking, we see that is not about protecting oneself. It’s not about guarding one’s rights. It’s not merely about enjoying the fruits of peace. It’s about giving oneself for the sake of others. It’s about forgiveness, reconciliation, graciousness, and SHALOM--peace and well-being for all. As Paul put it in Romans, *“Be truly affectionate in showing love for one another; compete with each other in showing mutual respect,”* (12:10). For in so doing, we show that we are participants in Christ’s kingdom in our midst, and so fulfill the admonition of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1b-3): *“You must live up to the calling you received. Bear with another in love; be humble, meek, patient in every way with one another. Make every effort to guard the unity that the Spirit gives, with your lives bound together in peace.”* *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”* Where and with whom do you need to make peace? Amen.