



Kingdom Season

10 November 2019

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Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16, Luke 14:1, 7-14

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In some countries churches are celebrating Remembrance Sunday. For tomorrow is the 101st anniversary of the end of WW I, Armistice Day, or Veterans' Day as we call it in the US. We are not celebrating Remembrance Sunday here this year. Nonetheless, peace is the theme of today's worship as you can easily tell from the prayers and liturgy, so in my sermon this morning I would like reflect on peace, what it is and what we can do.

I

To begin with, the Greek word for peace, εἰρήνη, that appears all through the NT and the LXX is an attempt to translate the Hebrew word שָׁלוֹם, which literally means "to be whole." The English word "peace" is derived from the Latin, *pax* which means "to make a pact, treaty."

But the Jewish conception of peace, which is carried over in the NT, is not limited to the cessation of war. It stands for "Welfare of every kind, sound health, prosperity, contentment and the like." Shalom is not negative or one-dimensional. It is much more than the absence of war. It is positive peace: harmony, wholeness, health, and well-being in all human relationships. It is the natural state of humanity as birthed by God. It is harmony between humanity and all of God's good creation. All of creation is interrelated. Every creature, every element, every force of nature participates in the whole of creation. If any person, any creature, any part of creation is denied shalom, all are thereby diminished.

Translators wrestle with expressing concepts in one language in another. Translating shalom in less than a sentence is a real challenge! The most successful attempt I know to translate concisely into English the meaning of shalom is the expression "Peace with Justice."

When Jesus called us to be peacemakers in the Sermon on the Mount, he called us to make, to create shalom. We serve as peacemakers in many ways, in many places, any time we work to overcome animosity

and hate, to end hunger and injustice, in some small way to struggle against forces of violence and exploitation. This is the fundamental insight that drives our refugee ministry.

An episode from one the darkest chapters of American history illustrates what I understand by Peace with Justice. In 1943 a young Japanese-American boy was detained in an American Japanese camp, one of the many that sprang up in the fear and panic after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. While he was there, a missionary couple visited the boy and other children in the camp. The Rev. and Mrs. Frank Smith expressed their love and showed that they cared. Suddenly, Rev. Smith died. But Mrs. Smith continued her visits. The impression they made on the boy was permanent. Forty years later, the boy, now a man stood at an international church meeting and said, "I think gestures like [hers] made me aware that I could trust others. I owe her my salvation and an eventual call into the ministry." This boy, Roy Sano, went on to become a bishop in the United Methodist Church.

Mr. and Mrs. Frank Smith dared to be different and stepped out in faith to care. Because they cared in 1943, something happened.

That is peacemaking, doing peace with justice. Passing on, living out the peace we have received in Christ. The peace we have received is dynamic. It is not static.

II

We receive peace as gift and task. We can look at it as two sides of the same coin.

On the one side, it is an unearned, undeserved gift of reconciliation with God. On the other side, it is a task to embody that peace, that shalom in our lives and also to share it with others. For if we do not share our peace, our shalom, with others, we lose it. It dies. Only by serving as peacemakers can we retain our own peace.

Those who share peace and spread it and work for it, do as God does. For that reason Jesus calls them children of God. But there is no peace,

there is no shalom where people hunger, where human rights are denied, where wives are beaten and children abused, where bullets and mortar shells fly, where God's good creation is poisoned, polluted or irradiated, where the homeless stay homeless and the sick go un- or undertreated and the unemployed find no jobs. Peace without justice is fake peace.

Being a peacemaker is not easy. And alone we never could serve as peacemakers. Fortunately, we are not alone. We have one another. We have the community of the church. Still, that mutual support alone would not be enough.

We are only able to be peacemakers through the grace of God, in and through the power of the Spirit. From Pentecost onward, the gifts of the Spirit are available in and through the language and experience of all nations and all cultures. No one people, no one culture has a lock on it. In the spirit that erupted on Pentecost God calls us to break through the patterns of isolation and dominance that oppose God's shalom of peace and justice. And if we follow God's strategy of personal encounter, we will find brothers and sisters where the world sees only strangers and enemies.

When we all in our small and insignificant ways support and encourage others who seek to live in the spirit of Christ, in turn, the circle of people serving as peacemakers grows and touches the life of others.

But as the very meaning of shalom reminds us, peacemaking is not limited to relationships between individuals. If there is ever to be shalom, if there is ever to be peace with justice, the conditions that lead to exploitation and violence must change. Peacemakers speak out against hate speech. Peacemakers call out racism, sexism and intolerance. Peacemakers inform themselves about assorted issues – and peacemakers vote. Peacemakers are political.

We fundamentally misunderstand the biblical conception of peace if we refuse to see this. We shall not all agree on the best ways to work for peace. However, that is not a surprise. No one has a lock on the truth. It is nonetheless cowardly – and unworthy of our calling – to be silent on

certain issues because we are afraid of conflict. As Christians we share the same calling to be peacemakers, even when, especially when we disagree on the means. Actually, these disagreements give us a marvelous opportunity to give witness, to show the world what peacemaking looks like!

Nonetheless, we also fulfill our call to be peacemakers closer to home by doing little things, such as really listening to our partners, children, parents and in-laws and talking with them – not at them but with them – and by treating everyone we encounter with respect. Whether we think that person deserves such respect or not, he or she is nevertheless created in the image of God just as we are. And it goes without saying that we ought to show more understanding for one another in the church, the fellowship that is supposed to prepare the way for shalom, the Kingdom of God. We can only begin to fulfill our calling to be peacemakers when, through the Grace of God and with the help of the Spirit, we begin to put aside our pride and self-righteousness and listen, really listen to other persons or in some other way show them we really care about them.

III

I would like to close with a Thai proverb: "When two elephants fight, it is the grass which suffers most." When conflicts explode into violence, when armed groups, militias or countries fight, it is the non-combatants who suffer the most – the children, the sick, the old, the women – all the unfortunate individuals who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Peacemaking is about keeping the grass standing, keeping the elephants from fighting, about saving the blades of grass.

The vocation of a Christian has always been peacemaking, wherever he or she may find him- or herself. In the midst of a resurgent right, raging populist demagogues and religious fanatics of all colors, I think this vocation has become ever more necessary.

Conclusion

After the Creed before the Prayers of Intercession, we shall speak Act of Commitment. I invite you on this morning to take this Act of Commitment seriously. Let us rededicate ourselves to the ministry of reconciliation, re-affirm our acceptance of our call to be peacemakers – begin where we are with what we can do. It will not be easy. But I am confident that, when we pray, when we stick together and support one another, the Spirit will give us the strength we need.

For the love of God, for the love of humankind, let us be faithful to our call.

Amen!