

Words of Comfort & Hope: The Gift of Peace

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John 14:14-27

It's an old story. A woman was preparing to give a talk on unity at her church women's Bible study. She woke up early to print out the scripture verses she would be using. She wasn't quite finished when her four children began coming downstairs for breakfast. She could hear them just around the corner in the kitchen as they rummaged through the refrigerator and cupboards looking for something to eat. One of them discovered half of a pastry. Soon they all began screaming and arguing, each claiming for his/her own, this mostly stale, half-eaten pastry.

Mom made a couple of futile attempts to quiet them down as she printed out her last scripture – "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Taking her cue from this text, she called into the kitchen, "Would one of you please be the peacemaker!"

There was a moment of silence, then her six-year-old son piped up, "I'll be the 'piece-maker', Mom!"

Then to his brother and sisters he said, "Here is a piece for you and you and you and one piece for me."

I suppose that's one path to peace. Here is another...a story told by Barbara Brown Taylor: "I still remember my nephew Will's first birthday party. He was as round and as bald as a Buddha at that point, still hovering on the verge of speech. Never out of his parent's sight, he was used to being the center of attention, only he was not spoiled yet, because he had not yet learned how to manipulate love for his own ends. He just thought everyone was loved the way he was, and he gave it away as fast as he got it.

"There were only a handful of us there that day – Will's parents, aunts, and grandparents, plus his godparents and their seven-year-old son, Jason. After the cake and the singing and the presents were all over, Will let us know how pleased he was by doing his new dance for us – a twirling in place that he had invented several days before with lots of fancy arm work.

"We were all circled around him admiring his dance when Jason simply could not stand it anymore. He charged through the circle, put both hands on Will's chest and shoved. Will fell hard. His rear end hit first, then his head, with a crack. He looked utterly surprised. No one had ever hurt him before, and he did not know what to make of it. Then he opened his mouth and howled, but not for long. His mother hugged him and helped him to his feet. The first thing Will did was totter over to Jason. He knew Jason was at the bottom of this thing, only since no one had ever been mean to him before he did not know what this thing was. So he did what he had always done. He put his arms around Jason and lay his head against the boy's body."

Concludes Taylor, "What Will did to Jason put an end to the meanness in that room. What I wanted to do to Jason would only have multiplied it. Yes, in my shock and anger, all my Christian convictions went right out the door. But according to Jesus, Will was right and I was wrong. For Jesus understood that the real enemy is not whoever pushes us down in the middle of our dance but whatever it is inside of us that wants to leap up and push back...When everyone has his or her hands in a fist...then the enemy will have won."

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." Could it be that a little one-year-old boy understood this peace of Jesus better than the adult world around him?

The biblical concept of peace, the concept shared, indeed lived out, by Jesus, is so much broader, so much deeper, than simply the absence of war – although certainly the absence of war is not a bad thing! But in the Bible there are times when there is no war at all, but still no peace. I think of the prophet, Jeremiah, railing against the prophets who "cry peace, peace, when there is no peace." This shalom – the Hebrew word for peace – refers primarily to the concern for blessedness, wholeness, prosperity, safety, welfare, happiness and security for all God's people. And it is important to note that this biblical peace involves God and community. This is not simply an individual thing – my peace with God. It is collective, social, public. God is involved in bringing wholeness, justice, blessedness, safety and well-being to all of us, and will not be finished with us until that happens. Martin Luther King, Jr., clearly understood this when he proclaimed, "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere."

The kidnapping of the girls in Nigeria reminds us that the exploitation and enslavement of anyone, means that we are all touched by, all a part of, their exploitation and enslavement. If we are divided from each other, hurting each other, nurturing grudges with each other, then there is no shalom – no peace. Says one of my mentors in ministry, Bill Nelson, "Peace is not placidity; it is not intellectual asphyxiation; it is not the triumph of the vegetable in you, at least, not peace in the biblical sense. It is,

rather, to be most alive, most aware of the world around you. Not immune from being hurt, but eager to restore the harmonies of life.”

“My peace I give to you...” Martin Niemoeller was a German Lutheran pastor when the Nazis came to power. As evil descended on his country and the world, he dared to stand in his pulpit and publicly proclaim, “God Is My Fuhrer!” It did not take long for the Gestapo to arrest him and place him in a concentration camp. But he survived the camp, survived Hitler, survived the war. Bill Nelson once met Niemoeller and shared this reflection: “I met Martin Niemoeller in Pasadena just following the Second World War. I expected to see a giant, a brick of a man, a saint. Well, he may have been all these, but in fact he was not large of stature, not strident, not vindictive. He seemed to speak and live out of an inner center, seemed to be listening to another voice. He was the living embodiment of what he once said: ‘If you believe in God, you can afford to wait.’ That is peace, a peace that can defy a tyrant and be at home still...in the world and with God.”

That, I believe is the peace of Christ, the peace the world cannot give, a peace arising from deep within us, a peace that comes from knowing that whatever around me may be coming unglued, deep down my life is held together by One from whom nothing can separate me, who loves me unconditionally, in whom I live and move and have my being – in this life and beyond this life.

But there is more. For, again, this peace of Christ isn’t just about me and my relationship to him. It is about us in community, the kind of community we are shaping. A pastor shares this story: “I’ll never forget the day Barbara Jenkins walked in the room. It was at a reception of some sort. You know what they are like. There was a punch bowl and some salted peanuts, little mints, some of those little triangle sandwiches – cheese, tuna fish, ham. Very nice, but you had to eat a lot of make anything out of it. People standing around, making conversation: ‘Think we’ll get any rain, sure could use some rain. Did you watch the game last night?’ Then Barbara Jenkins came in, and something in the room changed.

“ ‘That’s Barbara Jenkins.’

“ ‘Who is Barbara Jenkins?’

“ ‘You don’t know Barbara Jenkins? She spends her time writing letters, making calls, going and seeing folks to make a difference in the way the law treats juvenile offenders. Night and day, seven days a week, she worries the authorities to death.’

“Someone asked her, ‘Do you enjoy doing that?’

“ ‘Well, no, not really.’

“ ‘Do you get paid. Are you on salary?’

“ ‘Oh no, no salary.’

“ ‘Have your own children had trouble with the law? Is that why you...?’

“ ‘No, my family hasn’t had any legal problems.’

“ ‘Then why in the world do you do what you do? It’s no fun, you’re not making any money, none of your friends are doing it...’

“And she says, ‘Because I have to.’”

“I do not give to you as the world gives...” Again, the peace of Christ is not escape, is not the peace of the cemetery. It is something that speaks life – new life. I like to think of the peace of Christ as something that leads us from a limited identity to a larger identity; from a limited self to a larger self, a self that internalizes the classic Christian virtues such as justice, compassion, faith, hope and love. We no longer live just for ourselves. Again, consider Barbara Jenkins. We are, as Paul says, “in Christ” – loving what Christ loves, being passionate about what Christ is passionate about.

I think of the old benediction: “May God deny you peace, but give you glory.” Barbara Jenkins knows all about that. This peace of Christ can be a two edged sword to be sure. We have the comfort of knowing, as I said, that deep down, we are held together, that there is within each of us a quiet center where we truly can rest in comfort and peace. But the same love that holds us, also leaves us with a certain discomfort with the world around us; it opens our eyes to the fact that there can be no true peace for us until there is peace for all; no justice for us until there is justice for all. You might say that our peace with Jesus means we are never quite at peace. How can we cry peace when there is no peace?

A colleague tells of walking the dusty streets of an Arab village and meeting a young boy playing a flute. He asked to see the flute from which came such wonderful music, for it seemed so big and awkward. Upon examining it more closely, he found that it was made out of an old gun barrel. Talk about beating swords into plowshares! But the story makes a deeper point. Real peace is not about the absence of conflict or trouble. Rather is it about the management of that conflict until at last the deeper harmonies of life are restored – within ourselves, between ourselves and others, and with God. That is the challenge – and the promise – of the peace of Christ.