

Commitment to Peacemaking

World Communion Sunday / Peacemaking Offering

Psalm 85 Matthew 5:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last year, on World Communion Sunday, I preached a sermon entitled, "The Lord's Supper – Presbyterian Style." I shared some of the distinct differences in the understanding of this sacrament between different denominational traditions. But in the Presbyterian Church, this particular Sunday each year is also designation for the annual **Peacemaking Offering**. So instead of focusing specifically on Communion this year, I'd like for us to think about what it means to be a peacemaker.

As we heard a moment ago from Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." I thought of something earlier this week that I had never quite realized before concerning this verse. In our particular theological understanding, all people are *already* children of God. So if we believe that to be true, then perhaps that verse can be interpreted in reverse: **As children of God, we are all called to be peacemakers.**

What does it mean to make peace? On one hand, it involves an **internal** personal sense of peace – being at peace with oneself, with other people, and with God?

On the other hand, there's an **external** sense of peace. Does that mean, however, that we should be against all war and military aggression – no matter what? **Does it mean that non-violence is the only acceptable response to injustice and oppression?** If so, what should our response have been after 9-11 to stop Al-Qaida? If so, what affect would a non-violent approach have had in stopping Hitler and Nazi Germany? Was the Civil War necessary to stop slavery? What affect would a non-violent approach have had in seeking our independence from England over 230 years ago? And what about the often-adopted position of "Holy War" to justify that it is God's will that we, as a country, go to war? It's certainly a justification used by the Israelites in Old Testament times.

I would suggest that these are not always easy, clear-cut questions to answer. So **this sermon is not about whether we should ever go to war or not. It is, instead, about how we might live out our calling to be peacemakers.** In other words, even when there is war, how can we work toward peace?

The theme for the 2009 Peacemaking Offering of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is taken from **Psalm 85**, specifically verse 10, "**Justice and peace shall kiss each other.**" Makes for an interesting image, doesn't it?

The purpose of choosing this Old Testament text is that it bears witness to God's presence even in the midst of injustice. It is indeed fitting in our violent, conflicted, dangerous and ever-threatening world, to **keep imagining and working toward a world where justice and peace reign together.**

I want to share something I read this week. The article is entitled, "How to Preach Peace (Without Being Tuned Out)". It begins:

Preaching peace does not seem all that controversial. After all, who is against peace?

But what if a preacher tries to get specific about Jesus' call for us to be not only peace lovers but also peacemakers? What if one's commitment to peace in Christ leads to asking if the "war on terror" is best waged not by military action but by doing justice? What if one's faith leads to the conviction that all weapons of mass destruction should be eliminated so that groups and nations might not be able to obtain and use them? What if the nations of the world spending more than \$800 billion a year for military expenditures doesn't seem wise stewardship on earth's resources? How does one preach then?

Let me suggest a few things. First, I am not a professor of political science, an arms inspector, a news anchor, or a talking head on a cable news network program. While I have certainly have thoughts and often strong opinions in each of those areas, my ultimate responsibility, when I stand behind a pulpit, is to be an interpreter of the words found in scripture.

Our roots, therefore, lie in the Bible. We are shaped by and grounded, for example, in the Old Testament prophet Micah's vision of a world in which swords are beaten into plows; Isaiah's warnings concerning futile trust in chariots (the equipment of war) and political alliances; and Jesus' way of reconciling love in a land smoldering with violence.

Preaching peace, like all preaching, isn't a matter of "ought" and "should" but of inviting you to catch a vision of what God intends the world to be. The Bible presents a vision of "shalom". It is a vision of a world in which babies no longer die in infancy because of malnutrition or untreated diseases, a world in which people live out a full life span, a world where agricultural fields yield their produce to those who work the land, where weapons of war are refashioned into agricultural tools, where dividing walls are shattered, and a world where all people live in peace and safety with God and each other.

Collectively, therefore, we need to **put the bad news of the world into the context of God's Good News.** I think we are living in a world that is starved for vision – it is our task to feed that hunger. But if you're like me, I get frustrated when told what a mess the world is in and how concerned we ought to be, but then are offered no handles on what to do about it. How helpful is it to burden an already burdened heart and mind?

One of the things I like most about Christianity is that when it is functioning at its best it is in the business of liberation. And **it is liberating to take even one step, however small, in the direction of God's and our Vision – in this case a vision of a world at peace.**

Receiving a **Peacemaking Offering** today is one such step. Of the money received throughout our denomination, each congregation is to retain 25% of their collection for local ministries of peacemaking within the church and its community. Twenty-five percent will be used by presbyteries and synods, and 50% will be used by

the General Assembly, the nationwide and worldwide ministries through the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

The goal of peace, using its broadest definition, includes any ministry and program that works for the wholeness and well-being of all of God's creation. That includes ministries that offer God's peace wherever there is brokenness – in individual lives, families, congregations, communities, nations, and the environment. More specifically, **peacemaking is not just about the absence of war, it's also about the ending of all injustice and oppression, and ministering to those affected by it.**

So peacemaking also involves ministering to the poor, the hungry, the abused, the neglected, and the hurting. Peacemaking can mean contributing to the needs of a local food pantry, a neighborhood clinic, an after-school program, a domestic violence initiative, an organization that promotes equality or reconciliation, projects that help those who are coping in the midst of a tragedy or natural disaster, and new ways of living that promote a healthy environment.

In case you are not aware, College Hill (through the Session) is among about 4500 Presbyterian congregations throughout the country that have signed a document entitled: **Commitment to Peacemaking**. We are among those congregations that are on record as committing ourselves to strive for peacemaking through:

- Worship
- Prayer and Bible Study
- Peacemaking within Families and Community Living
- Community Ministries
- Study and Response to Global Issues
- Global Security
- Making Peace with the Earth
- And Receiving the Peacemaking Offering each year.

There is a weekly email newsletter from the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program that I find very helpful in providing support and ideas of how local congregations can engage in peacemaking. You can find it on the denominations website: www.pcusa.org. There are many other resources there as well, including a 43-page General Assembly paper entitled, "Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling."

As individuals and as a congregation, then, **I invite us all to study, think, reflect and then discuss the issues involved with justice and peace.** I invite us to keep in our hearts and minds the image in Psalm 85:10, a world where "justice and peace shall kiss each other."

So on this World Communion Sunday, as part of the celebration of our oneness with brothers and sisters, hermanos y hermanas, across the globe, let us strive, as children of God, to be peacemakers.

Amen.