

The Way to Peace

Isaiah 53: 4 – 5

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Matthew 5: 38 -48

In the Liturgical calendar, today/ tomorrow is Trinity Sunday. In our nation, of course, Monday has been set aside as a day to remember; a time to share our respect and thanks for those who have sacrificed so much – even their lives – for the gift of freedom that we are enjoying simply by being here today. (How easily we take that for granted!) I thought that this might be a good context then, to look at some of what the Scriptures have to say about the ‘goal’, or the ‘end result’ of the presence of the Trinity in our lives, as well as the national service performed by those we will honor on Memorial Day.

It seems to me that regardless of a person’s politics, most people would agree that the purpose of a country having a means of self-defense is obvious: so there can be peace in the world. We have armies so that we can feel secure (i.e., from our enemies). And the Scriptures certainly have something to say about both the subjects of peace *and* security, and of course, in particular, so did Jesus.

Now, how Jesus’ teachings might be applied (or even if they *should*) be applied to our nation collectively, since this country, while founded on Biblical principles, is *not* a theocracy (i.e., one led by priests/ clerics and ultimately, by God) well, that’s a question for another time – and I think it makes for a much better discussion than it does a sermon.

But even a cursory look at what Jesus taught and demonstrated in his life makes it obvious that stocking up on guns, armies, bombs, etc., would not have been his first suggestion for finding our peace or our security! It has always been my belief that Jesus’ teachings were directed to, not only a certain *group* of people, but to a *minority* of people within every nation and culture – i.e., those who have responded to his invitation to ‘follow me’.

Jesus used word pictures that point this out, like how ‘a *little* yeast can leaven a whole loaf’, and about the ‘*narrow* road that leads to heaven’ and how *few* actually choose it; and yet he tells us those that do chose the Way, are called ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’.

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So, Christians, representing and living out the grace and love of Christ in this hurting (and typically godless) world, can make a real difference – even though we are ‘outnumbered’. Which is something we’ve been talking about here for quite some time. And (as so many from FUMC have demonstrated) it is certainly possible for a believer to be living out the commands of Christ – and working toward *his* peace in the world – even if their *vocation* is to serve in the military. They are not contradictory, in my theology.

One of my best friends is the UM pastor in Delran, and he is also a chaplain in the NJ Air National Guard. He is expecting to be deployed to Iraq in July for about 3 months. And as he does while in NJ, he will serve Christ there, and he will minister to many men and women who are doing the same in some really tough conditions.

Its pretty obvious that Jesus’ ‘path to peace’ is different from the world’s, in just about every way imaginable. And that’s because the biblical ‘idea’ of peace is not exactly the same as ours, either. We tend to define peace as having ‘a lack of conflict’. So a person (or a nation) who ‘is at peace’ would be one who isn’t dealing with enemies, trouble, pressure and stress. And while that is a noble goal (wouldn’t it be nice – even for just a week?) it is probably not attainable in this life! There will always be conflict, don’t you think? Jesus said it himself: “In this world you will have trouble”! (Not, “you *might*... but you *will*!)

Biblical peace is something deeper than simply eliminating all outside conflict. (As an end result, that describes more of the Buddhist tradition than Christianity.) Biblical peace is better described in terms of ‘an inner resting in God’, even in the *midst* of conflict and trouble. We’ll talk more about that in just a minute...

Think about how different Jesus’ way of responding to conflict, and trouble is, from the world’s way. Let’s say, someone takes something from you that doesn’t belong to them... the world says, “Get it back!” Jesus says: “Give them more”.

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If someone slaps you in the face, the world says, “Slap back – or, at *least* get the law involved!” – its up to you to get justice. But Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek.” The world says, “Revenge” Jesus says, “Forgive”. (And lest we miss the point, we are to forgive not just once, but “Seventy times seven...”)

These seemingly simple instructions make life this side of heaven very complicated for a believer! How can we *not* struggle to try and understand where to draw the line – I mean, how literally are we to take these things? Are we destined to be the proverbial ‘doormats’ of the world? With everybody walking all over us, taking our stuff, abusing us, slapping us around, while we meekly submit? Should people just ‘get away’ with serious offenses? Is that a good picture of the Christian life?

Well, I don’t think so; and yet, these statements – commands – have to mean *something*, if we really believe that Jesus was actually speaking not only *for* God, but *as* God.

I think that what these teachings are pointing to lies at the heart of, as I said, the biblical response to the national focus of this weekend: the way to real peace and real security. (And by ‘real’ I mean *genuine*, and *lasting*.) And I’ll say it again, Jesus’ way to *that* end is *radically* different than the world’s way!

Now, the world’s way may accomplish *something*.... Let’s be honest! Wealth may bring a sense of security, as this world believes (but relatively few have it, and in the end it will always let us down). It will crumble and fade away, and it’s a very shaky foundation to build a life on. In the same way, a strong defense and powerful weapons may bring a *kind* of peace, but it is always a tense peace. Jesus is offering us something *more*.

But under what circumstance would a person choose to give up their shirt to someone who just demanded their coat? And why would a person turn the other cheek, or forgive and ‘let someone off the hook’ when they’re clearly in the wrong? And does this have anything to do with ‘peace and security’?

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I think it does. And, I know this is a holiday weekend and all, but can you think with me for a few minutes? I want to lay some ‘concepts’ on you!

I’ve told you that I’ve been reading (and re-reading) a wonderful little book by Brennan Manning called The Furious Longing of God. I know a number of you have gone out and bought a copy, and I hope it blesses you. In this book Manning continues to explore his life long passion of God’s unconditional love for us. What would happen in our lives (and world) if we *really* understood, and accepted that we are loved by our Creator (who knows everything about us!); loved with an unchanging, powerful, redemptive, and passionate love? What if we really believed that we are loved “as we are and not as we *should* be”, because there is no one who is as they ‘should be’?

That is a theme explored in this book (as in most of his other books). In this one, he takes those questions a step further. Let me share his words:

Once again, love by its nature seeks union. With the grace of recognition comes the awesome and alarming awareness that Jesus, the incarnation of the furious longing of God, wants more than a close relationship with you and me; he seeks nothing less than union.

What he’s saying, I think, is that God’s desire, God’s longing for *us*, is so intense that its goal is not just to give us information, and good feelings, but to *become one with us*... Now, that may sound a bit mystical to us (and in the historic use of the term *mystic*, it *is*!) but it is very deeply Scriptural. Jesus said that he and the Father were one – and he then included us within that mysterious intimacy.

John 15: 4 -5 (MSG) *"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me. "I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing."*

The word there that Peterson translates as “Live” is a Greek word, *meno*, from which we get the English word “remain”; but it means to ‘abide’ or, ‘to live with’.

Paul understood this, too.

Galatians 2:20 *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*

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Or, **Philippians 1:20** *For to me, to live is Christ (and to die is gain).*

What is union with Christ? I wish I had the words to adequately express what I'm thinking here!

Let me try some more of Brennan Manning's words:¹

"The wild, unrestricted love of God is not simply an inspiring idea. When it imposes itself on mind and heart with the stark reality of ontological [i.e., foundational] truth, it determines why and at what time you get up in the morning, how you pass your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, and who you hang with; it affects what breaks your heart, what amazes you, and what makes your heart happy. The revolutionary thinking that God loves me as I am and not as I should be requires radical rethinking and profound emotional readjustment."

Union, then, is the way to peace. Union is the way to the only real security we can know (i.e., eternal). Everything else, every other means to that end, every other 'technique' will be temporary and incomplete.

But, you can see; union is the opposite of *self-reliance*. Union means totally resting in, trusting in, leaning on God for life itself. And that is a struggle in this life where there are so many substitutes and short cuts to finding that elusive peace and security that we all long for. There are, certainly, easier ways, even if they don't give us what Jesus can.

So, back to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Could it be that these commands that seem so illogical from the point of view of this world are meant to move us in the direction of 'union' with Christ? Think about it: recognizing that our wealth is not where our foundation is being built, we can not only 'afford to be generous' but we will not despair if it is lost. (So, we can "give the shirt when our coat is demanded".) Because Christ is our life. He is our security.

We need not seek vengeance against someone who has harmed us either, because our lives are 'hidden in Christ', and vengeance is a matter for God. We can 'afford' to forgive – why? Because we understand that the basis for our union with Christ is *his* forgiveness of us! We are living new lives – it is no longer me, but Christ in me. The rules have all changed!

¹ The Furious Longing of God, P. 75

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Perhaps these teachings of Jesus are meant to help us see the radical change that comes about in our hearts in our union with him. As people with feet in both worlds, however – citizens of heaven living in this fallen world – there may be some extreme times when we will find terrible conflicts in living this out. Maybe we will need to defend ourselves – physically or in court. But even then, our hearts will approach that differently than others will, because our *peace* does not come from the resolution of all our problems, it doesn't come from anything this world can give us. Our peace comes by the presence of Christ in us.

I read an interesting email from Terry Teykl recently. Teykl is a United Methodist pastor who has become rather well known by promoting institutional change through prayer. He was a guest speaker at a recent Annual Conference, and has written a number of books. Anyway, he has a new devotional guide regarding wealth and how we use it, based on Scriptures that talk about this. I was reading that over (thinking about sermons for the coming Fall) and one statement really struck me.

“The spirit of poverty – the fear of not having enough, or losing what you have – afflicts many individuals and churches alike”. He goes on to say that this spirit needs to be broken, because it doesn't represent our life in Christ, and doing that is a Holy Spirit matter. But the concept of people – even churches – being gripped by “The spirit of poverty” opened my eyes, because it describes what I've been sensing in people ever since this recession started.

And friends, this is an observation, not a judgment or even a criticism ...because, I think I understand, and I emphasize. I had a conversation with someone recently whose job has been hanging in the air for over a year. This person eloquently described to me a growing feeling of 'despair' throughout this process. Well, she ended up keeping her job, but at the cost of some self-esteem, and a general hard-to- put your finger on feeling of anxiousness and unrest. People are reluctant to make financial commitments – purchasing things like cars, houses, etc. – because even many of those who are working feel like their financial foundation has become very shaky. (One of the reasons why the recession lingers on and on.)

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I see this conflict expressed in our “Practicing Radical Hospitality” campaign. On the one hand, we have had close to 100 *more* people than the last time, who have responded by making a pledge to our mortgage fund (and still counting). That is an amazing statistic for a 5th campaign. Unheard of! And we should celebrate that! And yet the total pledged *amount* is about \$100,000 less than the last time we did this.

We’re conflicted – we want to respond, but we’re not sure what the future will hold for us. I get it! I really do. (And by the way, I have confidence that God will bless that willingness, and ultimately sort all this out! We’re going to be fine!)

Does union speak to this? Again, I think so! Remember that old bumper sticker we used to see here and there, “Let go and let God”? Well, it is *hard* to ‘let go and let God’ be in control. We can do it to some degree – as long as we have something else to fall back on? (Money perhaps?) But totally abandoning ourselves into God’s care, to say, I’m going to do *whatever you would do*, I’ll go wherever you lead me... now, that’s hard.

We want to. But it is hard. When those theoretical things become tangible... we find conflict. And I’m certainly not just talking about making pledges here. But, frankly, money is a front line issue when it comes to trusting God - which is why Jesus talked so much about it! But, forgiveness raises the same issue. Forgiveness is a much easier concept to accept if we’ve never had anything bad happen to us at the hand of another person. Then it becomes very real.

Can I ‘turn the other cheek’? – whatever that would mean in my situation? Can I look ahead with confidence and a sense of joy in a world where my financial standing is a whole lot less solid than it was just months ago? And can I still be generous?

What *does* it mean to me... what does it mean to *you*... to be in union with Christ? How does union cut the ties of this world in our hearts, so that we find real, lasting peace? Peace that, as Jesus said, “the world did not give us, and the world cannot take away”?

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Let me close with this quote from Biblical Scholar John McKenzie, talking about coming to a relationship with Jesus Christ :

We recognize that the person whom we have encountered speaks to our innermost being, supplies our needs, satisfies our desires. We recognize that this person gives life meaning. I do not say a new meaning simply, for we realize that before we encountered this person life had no real meaning. We recognize that this person has revealed to us not only himself, but our own true self as well. We recognize that we cannot be our own true self except by union with this person. In him, the obscure is illuminated, the uncertain yields to the certain, insecurity is replaced by a deep sense of security. In him we find we have achieved an understanding of many things which baffled us. We recognize in his person strength and power which we can sense passing from him to us. Most certainly, if most obscurely, we recognize that in this person we have encountered God, and that we shall not encounter God in any other way.

The old hymn says it all:

*... the things of earth grow strangely dim
in the light of his glory and grace.*

Amen