

“Peace”
May 15, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

Anybody see any peace lately? It’s like we are playing hide and seek. Where, o’ where on this spinning globe of ours will we find peace? Come out, come out, wherever you are. Peace seems as improbable as the Loch Ness Monster.

I confess I am disappointed in the new National Terrorism Advisory System introduced by Secretary Napolitano the other week. Only two levels now: Elevated or Imminent

Not that I was particularly impressed with the previous color coded version used by the Department of Homeland Security:

Green: Low risk
Blue: Guarded
Yellow: Elevated
Orange: High
Red: Severe

Washington ignored my own suggested scale for the threat of danger and violence.

Level One: Raise your eyebrow
Level Two: Widen your eyes
Level Three: Blanche
Level Four: Run as fast as you can
Level Five: Curl up in the fetal position and say goodbye

There’s a tempting temptation for us to define peace by negation: by the cessation of hostilities, by violence restrained, contained, detained. Well, it’s not a bad hope to hope that people might stop molesting, ridiculing, degrading, demonizing, hurting each other, maybe even it’s a very good beginning, but it’s not peace.

Nobody’s being bombed, must be peace.

I don’t think so.

Labeling the cessation of hostilities ‘peace’ is tantamount to saying:

➔ It isn’t raining, it must be sunny!

- ➔ I'm not starving, I must be full!
- ➔ There's nobody yelling at me, I must be really popular!
- ➔ She didn't slap me, she must adore me!

Well now, "I don't hate you" isn't quite the same as saying "I love you."

Shalom, salam, solh, shanty, mir, baris, paz, paix, patche, pace, pax.

Pax vobiscum. Peace be with you.

The word for peace in Greek? Eirene. The name Irene comes from the Greek word for Peace. She, Eirene, also was a Greek goddess; the goddess of peace and spring, plus, most symbolically, a keeper of the gates of heaven. Statues of Eirene often depict her with the infant Ploutos in her arms, he the god of wealth and prosperity, which makes perfect sense. You want to go broke? You want economic disaster, whether a church, a family, a nation? Start a war, stay in conflict, nurse those grudges, keep fighting. Tough to harvest from a field filled with landmines. Good night, Irene.

On the bank of the River Yi a Mussel was basking in the sunshine. All at once a Bittern, happening to pass by, discovered the Mussel and pecked at it. The Mussel snapped its shell together and nipped the bird's beak; but no matter how tightly the Mussel nipped, the bird would not withdraw his beak.

Presently the Bittern said: "If you don't open your shell to-day, if you don't open your shell to-morrow, there will be a dead Mussel."

The shell-fish said in reply: "If you don't take your beak out to-day, if you don't take your beak out to-morrow, there will be a dead Bittern."

But as neither could make up its mind to loose its hold upon the other, a fisherman, who happened to come that way, seized the pair of them and carried them off for his dinner.

Here's the National Conflict Advisory System:

- Level One: miffed
- Level Two: injured pride
- Level Three: say some nasty things behind their backs
- Level Four: drag them down!
- Level Five: revenge!

Given stubborn, convinced, opinionated, intractable, demonizing us, is there any hope for peace in our demonizing, intractable, opinionated, convinced, stubborn world?

Yes, for if God is God, there is peace.

There world really doesn't have to be ruled by the Jerry Springer show.

Matter of fact, the divine reality is our only hope for peace. Which is Paul's message to the Ephesians. His audience? The Christian community filled with formerly feuding Jews and Gentile Greeks. His message? Understand this: before they become Christians, as far as the Greeks were concerned, there were the Greeks and everyone else was a barbarian. As far as the Jews were concerned, there were themselves the chosen people and everyone else were dogs, unclean, cursed. But those hideous barriers have been destroyed, broken down. Something new has occurred to erase the old ways and make them one people.

Listen: Ephesians 2: 11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

A shocking message for these non-Jews, these Gentiles, these outsiders. Once they were viewed as far off, hopeless, Godless, strangers, aliens, non-persons. Now they are brought near, citizens with the saints, members of the household.

There literally was a dividing wall that fenced them apart. We today use red carpets or Green Cards or the clothes you wear or religion.

One of their fences was located in the Temple in Jerusalem. Only Jews were admitted. Their other fence was the lattice wall from behind which Unclean Gentiles and Second Class Women could watch the synagogue service but were barred from going inside. No Gentiles served.

Sound familiar? Perhaps for those of us who remember the Jim Crow South before the Civil Rights movement, waterfountains and hotels?

As my wife's family in South Africa said, we may not like it but there is security in apartheid. The security of them 'minding their place.'

But the dividing wall, the barrier has been demolished (even though we keep trying to build new ones).

But remarkably, it wasn't as if they had to give up their Greekness and become Jews. It wasn't as if they had to conform to join the club. "Oh, I'll accept them, once they become like me, dress like me, talk like me, think like me." Says the cat, "Sure, I'll love a dog, so long as a dog becomes a cat."

Christ's way? Not conforming to the other, but transformation for both.

Both Jew and Greek have been changed. Those disparaging remarks about each other are like dust in their mouths, embarrassing relics of a prejudiced, unholy time. No room now for animosity.

Something entirely new has happened. Not just a new that is different, but a new quality altogether. New Humans. *Kainos* in Greek. Literally: remarkable, extraordinary. A new kind of human because they become filled, inside out, by Christ's humanity. New humans for whom there only can be the peaceable way.

They who hated each other did more than call a truce and stop hating each other. They did more than stop punching each other or saying ugly things about each other. They, because they promised to be true to Christ, loved each other. They accepted each other. They held each other accountable to the way they behaved.

So why expect peace from out there? You think peace can come from the world? Peace – same as God -- grows inside here. Spirituality, not geography. Attitude, not politics. Orientation, not diplomacy. Connectedness, not dominance. Why look for it from the world? A strong national defense is indeed useful, prudent, and necessary, but it cannot produce peace.

Look for peace as a gift from nudging up close to God. Our relationship with him is our peace. Before we can become peacemakers we must be peace receivers.

Someone once spoke about our lives of quiet desperation. Someone else (in a book called the Tao of Pooh) recently updated that comment by describing our lives as lives of

very noisy desperation. Lives, for instance, spent busy working to pay for the machines to save us time so we won't have to work so hard. Other cultures have their pubs, tea houses, outdoor cafes for getting together with friends and relaxing, the leisure of good talk, good time, and good humor. What do we have? Fast Food.

- Don't fight circumstances – work with them, water is far better for fighting fire than fire. It also helps to stop stoking the fire.
- Cleanse your mind, open it up: “the overstuffed mind cannot be filled.”
- Negatives can never be dispelled by negatives, only by positives
- Work for clarity rather than press a decision, for if you gain perspective, then the right decision has a way of becoming apparent.

The soil of contentment is where the seeds of peace take root and grow tall and rich and fruitful.

Once upon a time envoys from the Kingdom of Chu approach Chuang Tzu, the wise teacher, while he is fishing and ask him to come to the palace and advise the King. Chuang Tzu says how he has heard of a tortoise which lived for 3,000 years, and is now kept in a box in the palace and worshipped.

He asked where did they think the tortoise would rather be, dead in a box but worshipped, or crawling around in the mud?

They replied that the tortoise would rather be crawling around in the mud, so Chuang Tzu said he would stay by the river and fish.

Peace means change not in others but first in you.