

“Is Peace An Intruder?” CHC 10-4-15

Richard Attenborough’s film, ‘Gandhi’, features a scene explaining his philosophy of non-violence to the Presbyterian missionary Charlie Andrews. As they walk together in a South African city, they are confronted by two thugs. Reverend Andrews looks at the menacing young men and decides to run from them. Gandhi holds him back and says, “Doesn’t the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the right cheek you should offer him the left?” Our Presbyterian missionary mumbles that he thought the phrase was used metaphorically (Grace Notes, Yancey, P.190).

This is World Communion Sunday. It is also a Sunday when our denomination honors the ministries of Peacemaking. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program has sponsored the Peacemakers initiative for 30 years. This year a group from ten nations shares first-hand personal stories and experiences of peace and justice work around the world. The peacemaking initiatives this year focus upon the root causes of poverty and its impact on women and children, healing and reconciliation in cultures of violence, evangelism, responses to natural and human-caused disasters, and lifting up God’s vision of a just and peaceful world.

Even as we give special attention to peacemaking on one level, on another I detect ambivalence. A special woman in my former congregation served as the moderator of the Social Justice Committee of the General Assembly in the 1980’s and was very active traveling the world for the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program promoting nuclear disarmament. She traveled to Russia, throughout the U.S., and was hosted by Phil Donahue on his well-known T.V. show.

Another member of that same congregation, an Army Colonel, saw the efforts at peacemaking as a Communist plot to undermine America. One day, challenging her commitment to peacemaking, he argued that his work as a military officer in the U.S. was all about peacemaking as well. Both continued to seek their pastor’s validation.

For all our talk about peace and peacemaking there is very little peace on our streets, among nations, within many families, and our churches. Conversations centering on peace create little energy amidst our human need to control outcomes. Jesus, weary of conflict among his disciples vying for positions of status and power, the crowds demands on him, people arguing among each other, and his follower’s lack of faith, finally bring him to cry out, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?” (Mark 9:19)

How is Jesus responding today to a Syrian family barely escaping war and the barbarism of ISIS? What is he feeling about the hearts and attitudes of the leaders of those nations responsible for the occasion of such human misery? Even the hearts of people and leaders around the world have been stirred at images of a child’s body being washed up on the shore. A response is demanded.

What does Jesus say to a group of Pharisees coming to him with sinister hearts, inquiring, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce wife?” Jesus tells them to beware of their hardness of heart.

Peacemaking is a heart issue. Jesus stands on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, weeping, crying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:41-2). How is Jesus looking at our world? At you? At me?

Jesus is right. We don't recognize the things that make for peace. Nations make peace treaties only to buy time to pursue what they really want. All at some time or another are broken. It is as though human nature enjoys living in the air of conflict. Do Governor Rauner and House Speaker Madigan really desire peace and the appropriate service of the common good? Both in our state legislature and our congress we might ask what has happened to the art of compromise that marks successful leaders in a democratic system. Where is the real heart to pursue peace?

So Jesus, in the heat of conflict with both the Pharisees over domestic issues and his disciple's stern rebuke keeping children from having access to him, becomes indignant. Sometimes it is important to become appropriately angry and indignant at things intruding upon the peace and well-being of others. Jesus says, "'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it'. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:14-16).

Toni Morrison, in her book, 'God Help the Child', writes, "What you do to children matters. And they may never forget" (Sojourners, Sept.-Oct., p.45). Jesus is leading us into a deeper level of self-awareness. Peace is not just a concept to discuss. It is a life to be lived. And he gives us a visual aid.

Peacemaking is work. I have to set aside my own interests for the sake of the other. For true peace to work among nations this same attitude must prevail. Where I learn it over and over again is within marriage and the family. Paul, reflecting on the humility of Christ, leads us in the choices we must make. Allow me to share a paraphrase of Paul's words from 'The Message'; "If you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front....Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand"...Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what" (Philippians 2:3-6).

In the 26th Psalm, David shows us the way to live in a world filled with conflict coupled with pain and suffering. He asks God to examine his heart and mind. His focus is on God's steadfast love as a way to keep centered and resist being drawn in by the deceitful and hypocritical voices around him. His prayer is for God to enable him to live a life that is virtuous, a life in which he can practice kindness, do what is right, and forgive an adversary.

Peacemaking begins in a soul open to the shaping influence of God's love and forgiveness. Martin Luther King Jr. offers us a glimpse into how God molded his heart in response to the hatred which victimized him. The real goal, King said, was not to defeat the white man, but "to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority....The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community" (Yancey, p.191).

Peace is an intruder when we are centered upon our own self-interest. The Pope challenged us to have open, generous hearts and spirits. Kathleen Parker writes in her editorial that "The brilliance of Francis' address to America's leadership and to the people was his nuanced approach to our most divisive challenges---immigration, climate change, the sanctity of life. Careful not to preach, he encouraged thinking of a higher order....Francis attempted to provide a moral compass to guide us...It's up to us figure out how to make practicable that which is divinely inspired" (The News-Gazette, A-8). Both sides of the political aisle rose in applause. Why?

Because we witness a human being paying as much attention to a child as to the leaders of our nation and know that is right. We see someone who embodies humility, lives in a humble apartment, refuses to ride in limos, focuses on compassion, identify with the plight of the oppressed, the refugee, the sick and the poor.

He tells our Congress that "A nation can be considered great, when it defends liberty as did Lincoln, when it fosters a culture which enables people to dream of full rights for all their brothers and sisters and like Martin Luther king, Jr, when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed as Dorothy Day tirelessly did, which is the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton".

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is the resounding message to our leaders and to us. That message transcends political ideologies and parties. Peace begins when I give enough of my heart to God to allow God's compassion and redemptive love to forget myself and embrace the well-being of my neighbor. The 'Core Values' of FPC state, "FPC, Champaign, strives to assist and empower those in need locally and around the world through prayer, action and financial support". We do that locally, regionally and globally.

To the Reverend Andrews who thinks Jesus is speaking metaphorically, Gandhi replies, "I'm not so sure. I suspect he meant you must show courage---be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside. And when you do that it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred decrease and his respect increase. I think that Christ grasped that and I have seen it work". Ironically, Phillip Yancey tells us that some Hindu leaders, Gandhi's own religious heirs, suggest that this principle grew out of his Christian influences and has no place in Hinduism (Yancey, p.190). May we be so influenced.

On this World Communion Sunday, we join with Jesus in showing indignation to those actions impeding the children from coming to him for blessing, those attitudes denying the rights and dignity of people created in God's image, and especially the sin and selfish attitudes within ourselves that are the source of the lack of peace in our homes, churches, neighborhoods, communities, state, nation, and world.

As the children sang at an interfaith gathering which included Pope Francis, we pray, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me".

