



Sunday, December 4, 2016

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***MAKING PEACE: Conflict as a Pathway to Peace.***

*Every social contract is an agreement among a community about commonly held values and understandings concerning correct behavior. But whenever the law comes into play it can get tricky. Conflicts about interpretation and meaning of the law can sometimes create discord and factions.*

*As the first Christian churches were being established these communities were embroiled with controversies and conflicts because they tried to codify an uncodifiable God. The Apostle Paul was quick to point out that the Love of Christ is wide, liberating and extraordinarily inclusive. His letter to the Colossians speaks out against legalism that demands dietary codes and the false asceticism of self-denial as a way toward holiness, or hierarchical status for those who claim to be the most spiritual because of their religious practices.*

*For Paul, experiencing Christ is all that matters. Following in the way of Jesus quite naturally brings about the best in communities because, even in dissent, love, gentleness, and mercy flow through the community, reflecting the very nature of the Triune God.*

*Here these words from chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Colossians verses 11 through 15...*

**Colossians 4:11-15**

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

*This is the word of God for the people of God.*

Many years ago, during a particularly dark time in my life, I came across the wise words of Theodore Roethke printed in your bulletin: **“In a dark time the eye begins to see.”** Through the years as I experienced this truth over and over, that ‘seeing’ through the maze and shadows of life’s challenges, whether risking being vulnerable, or attempting to ‘melt away the frozen fear and insecurities’, that Neely referenced in the Invocation, I have found a holy courage beginning to grow a heart of peace within me – deep, real peace. It is a profound quietness of soul providing courage and strength I have no other explanation for -- nor need to have. I am content with the awareness of its presence.

PLEASE JOIN ME IN PRAYER:

*Beloved Presence, I ask that the words of my mouth and the hearing and reflecting of all our hearts bring joy to you, our Loving Creator and Sustainer. Amen.*

FAMED AUTHOR, Madeleine L’Engle once said that what is more important than getting the ‘right’ answers is learning to ask the right questions. In the brief moments we have this morning, my hope is to offer you questions to ponder about the experience of peace in times of conflict, rather than offer hard and fast solutions, since each situation/person involved may call for different, nuanced responses from you.

Journey with me as I begin with expanding the question posed last Sunday: How DO we define Peace – especially when in conflict? In our Advent Discussion booklet last week we saw the Apostle Paul’s indication that “...the peace of God was something beyond calming the turmoil of our immediate circumstances.” So we must first acknowledge that:

- \*PEACE is NOT the **absence** of conflict (just as courage is not the absence of fear!)
- \*It is not mere tolerance – for which we must ‘grit our teeth’
- \* nor is it perfection, as if we had to ‘achieve’ a set of principles in order to ‘make it’ to some state or status of Peace
- \*It is not disciplined self-control, which we sometimes call ‘patience’
- \*Nor is it denial or passivity, nor a demandingness that we exact of people or things so we may feel ‘at peace’.

Some of what Peace is NOT may be involved along the path toward what I am choosing to call SOUL peace, for soul PEACE surely doesn’t depend on the removal of the chaotic circumstances of life for us to know the ‘Peace that passes

understanding” - which was referred to last week from Paul’s letter to the Philippians in the New Testament.

While there isn’t time to expand on these thoughts now, just pause to consider when or where you have experienced an inexplicable calmness that surprised you, especially if you were in the midst of a conflictual situation or relationship. **Has** that happened to you? How would you describe it? In my experience words like indescribable, or ineffable come to mind, or ‘mysterious’ or incomprehensible in my effort to express a state of being that defies language. For, that pure ‘peace that passes understanding’ is just that - **beyond** our mere intellectual comprehension.

I have come to believe SOUL Peace **is** -- among many other dimensional concepts:

\* the absolute recognition and open acceptance of our vulnerability in the Presence of the One who gives us life and breath;

\*It is an awareness of the singular right of the God Who Is to exact justice - instead of my ‘right’ to ‘even a score’, like ‘an eye for an eye’ way of thinking. But what of justice? When and how do we fulfill the call from the Scriptures to ‘Do justice..’? We avidly search our world for a right path toward peace out of conflict. But how will we know it if we find it?

You have often heard stated here the phrase ‘In the Way of Jesus’. I’m choosing to utilize that **concept** of The Way of Jesus to be ‘The Path’ toward Peace. For Jesus, while described as ‘The Prince of Peace’, lived his time on Earth with a fiery intensity of profound commitment and compassion. During this season in particular, Jesus is often referred to as a meek and mild character, but images of him as a pale, aloof figure as he grew, seem somewhat deceptive to me, given his race and the era and context in which he lived. I don’t want to distort our understanding of the nature of Jesus, but expand our way of seeing him.

Have you read, for example, how he related to his disciples?!

Take the time Jesus was teaching a crowd about many life issues, and little children were brought up to him to be blessed. His disciples REBUKED those who brought them. If you wanted to, you could read Jesus response this way (soft, lifeless...) OR, as I suspect he would have said it: “Let the little children come to me and DO NOT hinder them, for the kingdom of Heaven BELONGS to such as these! I tell you the TRUTH, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it!”

Or, the time two of his disciples were vying for the Honored positions of sitting on either side of Jesus when they expected him to set up his kingdom right away. Jesus' response in that moment, can be read as either perplexing or shocking:

He responded, "You don't know what you're asking! Can you drink the cup I have to drink? Can you go through the baptism I have to bear?" "Yes, we can," they replied. "You will indeed drink the cup I am drinking, and you will undergo the baptism which I have to bear!" Then he called all his disciples together, said: "You know that the so-called rulers in this world lord it over them, and their great men have absolute power. But it must NOT be so among you. NO - whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant of you all!...For the son of Man himself has not come to be served -- but to serve, and to give his life to set others free!"

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that Jesus was anything BUT strictly 'mild-mannered'. I'm glad, for there is a vitality about how Jesus related that encourages me when feelings of sorrow or fear, anger or ecstasy enter my soul-space. We are ALL ALIVE with the power of choice to be fully human, in any and every moment of confrontation to choose peace.

And we also want to acknowledge the uniqueness of his Way in responding to multiple conflicts:

- expressing great tenderness to the suffering humanity around him;

- with fierce, expressive anger at the self-centered foolishness of greed and hubris he encountered;

- and with the measured wisdom toward those seeking hope or wrestling with the inexplicable circumstances they were in,

...to mention a few of the Ways of Jesus.

From his core of true Peace, Jesus responded to life and the lives around him in ways that offer light for us on our path - especially the dark or shadowy places of confusion or quandary we encounter. He met every person where they were and responded accordingly.

BUT - you say - I'M not Jesus! NEITHER AM I!! Which makes it all the more astounding that we have been guided to the WAY of true Soul-Peace for our lives.

As I conclude, I don't want to pack a lot of language around this last thought, but I do need to emphasize the substance of that WAY which provides the power to choose Soul-Peace in the midst of conflict: LOVE.

Four simple letters that excavate our intentions, our passions, our motivations – surfacing the very life-energy that we use to heal or damage others according to our choices.

THIS Love is not cheap...Jesus didn't suffer as he did in a romantic, sentimental way – he courageously faced ridicule, misunderstanding, and ultimately torture so others would come to SEE what REAL LIFE, what LOVE with 'teeth', so to speak, love with substance and dimension could provide. It cost Him everything to show us His Way. He spoke with shocking veracity to pierce any falseness present. His example is a luminous light for the path toward Peace in all circumstances.

This Path gives us the capacity to SEE that which is most essential for true Peace: the power of LOVE, even in the midst of confounding, often conflictual places of life -- IF we are willing to embrace it. How else can we expect, as our Scripture stated this morning, to SEE, to know all others in their absolute equality with us, or have the capability to forgive AND seek forgiveness, to know what it is to be 'called to live in peace'?

Whether or not you believe in the divinity of Jesus, the love he lived and revealed for us to follow has throughout the centuries proven to be THE Way to “a peace that passes understanding.”

Easy? Of course not. Simple? Only in the clarity of LOVING with a humble heart. Then we can live out of a place that leads us to “Do justice, Love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

The next time when you feel conflict with another, why not PAUSE, consider what the conflict is really about, then allow love to courageously guide you through it. If you are in a dark place today, perhaps it is an opportunity to begin to see differently.

There is a teaching in the Jewish collection of ancient wisdom, a Jewish Midrash, in which it is pointed out that the eye has both dark matter – the pupil – and white matter. It is out of the dark that we see light.

May it be so for us...may it be so...