

Beatitudes: Blessed are the Peacemakers

Psalm 122

Romans 12:14-21

7th beatitude: blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. We just heard a Psalm that calls for prayers for peace, and expresses desires for peace and for the wellbeing of Israel—Jerusalem, specifically. When we get to the ministry of Jesus and the community of Jesus-followers (followers of “the Way”), those prayers and desires extend out. Jesus turns religion inside-out, in some ways, as we are discussing in these beatitudes.

Which brings us to our next reading from Romans. Like Jesus did from time to time, the apostle Paul is preparing the Christians for the persecutions that he knew were coming. Actually, by Paul’s time they had already begun, informally. Within a couple decades following Paul, the Roman emperor would organize an all-out persecution of any who followed the Way of Jesus. Keep that in mind as you hear these words. And, of course, keep in mind our current social context...

Romans 12:14-21

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live

peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ²⁰No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is the word of the Lord.

A historian I recently listened to on the radio (commenting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine) calculated that in the 4,000 or so years of recorded human history, only about 300 of those years have been without a major war—those years happening here and there, not in big stretches. The historian somewhat cynically said that "Peace is merely that brief, glorious moment in history when everyone stops to reload their weapons." Or to marshal their forces.

That's fairly cynical. There is peace that is made every day, even during wars. Yet, why do humans war with each other so much? It appears to be the norm, rather than the exception.

Along those lines, here is a curious and funny (to me) Bible verse. 2Samuel 11:1 (First and Second Samuel are about the rise and fall of king Saul, and then of king David. These books tell the story of how the balance of power shifted in that part of the world, but mostly about how Israel ascended as a regional superpower, especially under king David. Which leads to this verse in 2Sam.11:1.

Here is what it says: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go to war...”

The rest of the sentence doesn’t really matter. It’s just a startling statement to make, to begin a narrative. There is no commentary on it, or judgment about it.

Just a statement: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go to war...” It’s almost funny (to me). Sort of like, “In the spring of the year, when the Mariners go to Peoria to begin baseball season...” But in this case, it’s when kings go to war. It was just so normal for them.

Peace is a desire that many, if not most human beings share, yet conflict seems to be the norm. Conflict, not just out there somewhere in our world or in government, but within communities, families, and within persons — within hearts and minds.

The latter, conflict in the human mind, is why the Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, a specialized agency of the UN aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture)—the preamble to their constitution declares that, “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” UNESCO was created in 1945 in order to respond to the firm belief

that, after two world wars in less than a generation, that political and economic agreements are not enough to build a lasting peace. Peace must be established on the basis of humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity.

And, we could add, spiritual solidarity.

And it is into this reality of our lives and our world that Jesus speaks these words: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Children of God" being about as high an affirmation and blessing as one can receive.

And although conflict seems to be a norm, so is peace—or at least the desire for it. The word "Peace" or "shalom" or "salem" or "salaam" (or a related word) is a common greeting in many parts of the world. And it's a common way to say farewell too. And like a lot of common greetings, it has probably lost its intended effect of actually wishing peace and blessing upon another person. It's just become another word to say. But what a cool way to greet someone, when it's meant. And what a cool way to say farewell, blessing someone with wishes of peace on their journey.

And as you have probably heard, and will hear again now, the word “Shalom” in Hebrew, and “Eirene” in Greek mean much more than absence of conflict. They mean wholeness, wellbeing, harmony, completeness.

So when Jesus says “blessed are the peacemakers,” (lit. “the irenic”) he means peacemaking in that all-inclusive sense of bringing wholeness; of working for the well-being of everyone; ways of working things out between people that are fair and just.

Let’s think for a moment: who are the peacemakers in today’s world? Who can we look at and look to—putting on our Jesus glasses, seeing as God sees—and say, “Look, there is a peacemaker”? Who is bringing wholeness, and harmony and wellbeing in our world?

I want to remind us of a few simple things that peacemakers do, or can do—simple ways that *you and I* can be peacemakers where *we* live and move and have our being. We don’t have to work for the United Nations or be in a position of authority to be a peacemaker. Actually, we have authority! From God, through the Holy Spirit. Anyone and everyone can be a peacemaker!

Before we talk about simple ways to be a peacemaker, it needs to be said that not every effort to bring peace will *immediately* result in peace. Or, put another way, the effort to achieve long and lasting peace and wellbeing sometimes creates short term discomfort, or even a necessary short-term conflict. There are some challenges so deep and enduring that will require a great deal of time and effort to heal and make right. And, there will always be people who are not interested in peace. As the old joke goes, if you want to cause conflict, work for peace. I mean just try to work for common sense gun laws...

The point: not all efforts to make peace will achieve it right away. It requires perseverance.

Which leads to a second preliminary comment: our call, first and foremost, is to make an effort. To do our part, no matter what someone else does or doesn't do. The apostle Paul says, "If it is possible, *as far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with everyone." In other words, make the effort. It doesn't have to be perfect; just do your part. We are the ones who are responsible for ourselves and our actions, to make the effort to put as much wellbeing and wholeness out there as we can, with everyone. Especially those who are difficult.

So, let's talk about the "so far as it depends on you," and me part of peacemaking.

What can peacemakers do? Here are reminders of some simple, doable ways to try to be peacemakers within our sphere of activity and influence day to day.

1. Just do the next right thing, right in front of you. If you don't know what else to do, simply do the next right thing, right in front of you. This applies not only to peacemaking, but to *any* aspect of our life—if we're restless, bored, irritated, confused, or generally wondering how I can make the world a better place. Do the next right thing, right in front of you.

It could be something small. Send an email of blessing and encouragement to someone while you're already on the computer, or a text message of blessing and encouragement to someone if you're already on your phone. Pick up a piece of garbage in your neighborhood while you're out on a walk (and then throw it away!). Hold the door for someone, let someone get in line in front of you at the grocery store, or in traffic (eek!). If you're baking zucchini bread, make a little extra and take some to your next-door neighbor. You don't have to change the whole world all at once. But we *can* do something to

brighten the world where we are. It can be as simple as smiling at someone (Mother Teresa: “peace begins with a smile”). Sometimes peace begins by paying attention to our face! 😊

The great line at the end of this passage from Romans says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” I love that so much. I’m not going to let what someone else is doing determine my actions or reactions. I’m going to be proactive in doing good, to create a more irenic, beautiful, and caring world, even in a small way. And let God turn all of our efforts to the good.

The Bible says, and it says it often, “do good.” Instead of fretting over the badness of bad people, we put as much goodness out there as we can. Trust in God, entrust others to God, and do good.

Here is another great encouragement from Mother Teresa. This was found written on the wall of one of her children’s homes in Calcutta:

People are often unreasonable, irrational and self-centered; love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you; be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight; create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous; be happy anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten; do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it may never be enough; give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.

Do the next right thing, right in front of you. And trust God for outcomes.

2. Peacemakers are willing to be present to others in their life experiences:

their pain, and their joy. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom.12:15). There is a lot of weeping in the world these days.

And, there is pain and hurt in the people right around us. Being a peacemaker means we are willing to stay present with people, and simply listen with an open and compassionate heart. And as you know, we are listening not just to words, but what is beneath the words: we listen to hurts and disappointments, hopes and longings. And joys too! When someone receives good news, we jump up and down with them in joy. Even if we can't literally jump up and down! Because joy is contagious. If covid is contagious we may as well remember that joy is contagious too. So, go spread that virus, would you?

Some of the best ministry we can do with our neighbors, coworkers, family members and friends, is the ministry of presence, and compassion. People are

weary, stressed out, overwhelmed sometimes, and experiencing loss of various kinds. And our contribution to making peace, even in *our* weariness perhaps, is to be compassionate people. Who see, really see, others. Who listen, and are willing to take the time to be present to others in their challenges. And to celebrate with them too! We ask God to supply us with strength and love, so we can be present.

3. (And this is where things might begin to pinch a little bit) To become peacemakers, we can try to speak well of others. Paul says “Bless those who are difficult; don’t curse them.” And the word “bless” in Greek is literally the word “eulogize.” It’s where we get the English word... It means, “To speak a good word” or “To speak well of.” That’s what it means to bless, instead of curse. We bless by speaking a good word, or speak well of someone. And the old, “*Well, bless their heart*” doesn’t count! (I’m not sure that’s actually a blessing)

It’s important to do good; here, we are encouraged to speak good. This can be a challenge when it comes to people who are difficult for us to love. It’s tempting to curse them! To speak a *bad* word. But in the context of trying to be

peacemakers, and bringing well-being, that can be divisive. And probably not good for our own sense of inner shalom.

The opportunity here is to find a good quality in someone. Everyone has at least one good quality! It's easy to do this with people we like and feel naturally drawn to, and we can let the blessing/eulogizing flow. It's harder with people we have a hard time loving. But that's when peacemaking becomes peacemaking. When there is reconciliation, and positive movement in a relationship.

And if we can't think of or muster up a good quality to find in someone, we can still pray God's best for them, wish them well, and lift them to God's light and presence, and move on. We don't have to agree with someone, but we don't have to add to a spirit of division either.

4. Sometimes peacemakers take risks. We each need to do our own risk assessment, but sometimes peacemaking is risky business. Sometimes the right thing to do, right in front of us, is to put ourselves out there with the actions we choose to take, in creating shalom, and fostering wellbeing.

After Sept.11 (2001), I started seeing stories on social media about a high school classmate who lived near Northgate. I knew her from Young Life, a Christian group that ministers to high school students. She is shy, as I

remember, and would not consider herself an activist (although she is, in her own way because she just quietly goes and does things). Along Northgate Way and 15th there is a mosque, which after 911 was being vandalized, with people heckling and threatening the peace-loving Muslims there. At that time my classmate was working part time, and would go for walks, sometimes by the mosque.

It occurred to her one day that she could do something simple to be a peacemaker in the face of what she saw was unjust treatment of peaceful people. So she spoke to a leader of the mosque, who gave her permission, along with others, to set up a folding chair in front of the mosque and just stay for periods of time, and be present. To offer some protection (with others who did the same thing), to have conversations with people, and to correct the false notion that every Muslim is a terrorist.

It was the next right thing right in front of her; she entered into the pain and weeping of people (the pain caucasian folks as well as the Muslims who were heartbroken by what had happened); it built relationships of all kinds; she spoke well of people. And, it was risky. She had a man throw a can of soda at her as he drove by, and she was called names by others.

On her Facebook timelines someone posted, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” Her reply was to say that she figured she was a child of God, and blessed with that identity, so she felt called to be a peacemaker. In a way, she took the beatitude in reverse. Whatever works!

We are, indeed, called to be people of peace. May God bless our efforts, and multiply them to create lasting peace.