

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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A Bloodless Peace?

Proverbs 3.13, 17-18; Ephesians 2.13-22

Russ Dean, September 21, 2008

It is a universal desire. I believe I can state unequivocally, absolutely, that all people, everywhere, in every age and every place, living under every condition, regardless of ideology or governance, irrespective of religion or race or tribal claim, all people want to know it: pax, paz, eirene, salim, shalom... PEACE. In his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Frederick Bueckner says of peace,

Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars. Beggars can't be choosers; we'd most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew peace, *shalom*, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.¹

It is what we desire in our inmost being. It is the sustaining water for which we thirst. It is the desire of God for the whole created order. The ancient prophet, Isaiah, envisioned for his people that "peaceable kingdom," which is the land to which we are called:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11.6-9).

To go forward into that "promised land," first we have to believe. And most of us do not – simply do not believe it is possible. And because we do not, in relegating "peace" to some otherworldly perspective, in abrogating it as a work that God alone will have to achieve, in some apocalyptic end of this world as we know it, we have sentenced ourselves to the illusion of the

¹ This is in his entry, "Peace," p.83.

inevitability of war. War on an interpersonal level, as well as war as our global sin. And in so doing, in a twist of surely demonic irony, we have elevated violence to the level of the divine. Rather than praying that God would give us courage to resist evil, in generation after generation we have prayed that God would be on our side in our aggressions. Rather than flying God's banner before us in the sure but difficult work of cultivating peace, we have let God do our bidding, as an agent of our warring.

Though Isaiah sets his vision in a kind of euphoric hyperbole, such is the exaggerated prerogative of the poet. Of course children and poisonous serpents will never play together – but such a picture should not deter us. Peace among people is an attainable, realistic hope for this life. First we must believe... and then we will have to work for it. Most of us do not believe, and most, even some who do believe, are not willing to determine the personal courage, the fortitude, the blood and sweat and tears that peace will require. I did say blood... I'll come back to that.

Edward Norman is the main character in Charles Sheldon's book, *In His Steps*. Norman is transformed when he allows a simple question to guide his decision-making as the editor of the local paper. That simple question then transforms his life. What would Jesus do? Charles Sheldon didn't package his 1896 book with the bracelets and t-shirts that are now ubiquitous in our culture, but his idea took hold in the mind of an enthusiastic young Christian named Anthony Campollo, as it has for so many others. Ranking as the 39th best-selling book of all time, *In His Steps*, has now sold more than 30 million copies worldwide.

Campollo is a sociologist by training, but if you think that sounds boring you should hear him speak. A popular speaker at universities and Christian conferences for the last few decades, Campollo is a card-carrying Evangelical Christian, with a Brooklyn accent, and a smile that will

warm your heart – that is, when he’s not spewing caustic challenges or spitting witty stories at his audience.

The draft was in effect during the Korean War, which was raging during Campollo’s adolescence, and in a preliminary meeting at the draft board office, an army colonel interviewed Campollo. The colonel was taken in, as so many of us have been, by Campollo’s strong sense of conviction. Something he had said led the colonel to ask the young Campollo sternly if he had any doubts about the rightness of killing for his country. In recalling this story Campollo says, “The colonel asked me directly, ‘Do you think you could shoot at another human being or drop bombs from an airplane?’”

When Campollo explained to the colonel that he’d just read Sheldon’s book and he would have to ask, should he be flying over an enemy village, “What Would Jesus Do?,” the exasperated colonel shot back, “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard. Everybody knows that Jesus would never drop bombs!”

Campollo agreed – and he has spent much of the rest of his life, not dropping bombs, but spreading the good news of a Jesus who offers peace, a different way, all together.²

I believe peace is possible. I believe it is one of the deep instincts, programmed into the fabric of the human psyche.³ But because of what our scripture calls “sin,” that undeniable

² Campollo recalls this episode in his book, *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch*, in his chapter, “Can Christians Kill,” p.163.

³ Perhaps we think more often of the “fight or flight” mechanism in our innate instinct, the animalistic defense reaction that often strikes out aggressively – and such an instinct is, obviously, present in all of us. But I believe that we are made to be at peace – maybe this is why that “fight or flight” mechanism springs so aggressively when our peace is threatened! My point here is that we should not defend war or aggressiveness by leaning on some kind of instinctual, primal determinism (as if we can’t help it – our genes make us do it!). If we are evolved creatures, and still evolving, surely we are evolving toward the “peaceful genes” with which we have been endowed, more than toward any more aggressive ones.

brokenness within us, among us, Peace will have to be achieved. Like everything else that is worth while, peace takes work.

Many believe peace can only be achieved at the hands of military strength. Such a belief is so logically contradictory it should strike us as funny – like trying to lose weight on a diet of overeating! (“I’ll have the fried donut special and a 2-liter Mountain Dew, please!”) After admitting to last Wednesday night’s gathering for Bible study and discussion that I hadn’t enough sense to stay away from particularly poisonous political phrases – even during a campaign season – I said that I know of no concise phrase that is any more diametrically opposed to the lived wisdom of Jesus Christ than the oft-quoted mantra, “Peace Through Strength.”⁴ “It’ll preach,” as they say, to the red meat lovers in the political convention hall – and in the sanctuary – but it is not the message of Jesus, whom Christians have dared to call the Prince of Peace.

Time and time again scripture affirms that it is not on the strength of force that peace comes. Not on the “war horse” as the Psalmist says (Psalm 33.17), but with the power of love. “*My power is made perfect,*” God says to us through the Apostle Paul, not through force or aggression of any kind, “*My power is made perfect... in weakness*”(2 Corinthians 12.9).

It is through the shedding of blood that humans have most often sought peace – blood offered to the gods through a sacrificial slaying, or blood offered to one another through the aggression of our armed slaughter. Our actions prove that we believe there is no other way. We are spending more than \$340 million every single day to wage our war in Iraq. Our total now exceeds \$550 billion spent, or nearly \$2,000 for every single person in this country. More than 4,100 American troops have died, and in October of 2006 a research team from John’s Hopkins

⁴ I had entitled our discussion, “Whom Would Jesus Bomb?” and we had a lively conversation on this topic.

University put the Iraqi death toll, which is impossibly difficult to count, in a range between 400,000 – 900,000.⁵ This is our spending for one war. Spending, on a strength that will not bring peace.

To make myself clear: strength may provide for us a temporary absence of war. But strength will not bring peace. And the followers of Jesus should demand nothing less. I don't expect this to be the mentality of the American public, in general – but the followers of Jesus are called to a higher standard. Peace, true wholeness, true sustained life together, will have to come by another “power” – and that is the power of self-giving love. You see, blood may be involved – but it will not be “their” blood, shed by “us.” Your blood, shed by me. The difficult truth that Jesus teaches his followers is that peace comes with the power of love – which may, indeed cost blood. Our very own.⁶

To try to prove this to you, let me move away from the arena of war, and let me ask you when was the last time that force of any kind, brought peace to your own household. When did you use force, I hope not physical force, but when did you assert your “power” over a spouse, a child, a parent, a loved one... and the result was true peace to your home? When? You see, if you cannot bring peace in your own home by means of aggression... how much less realistic is it to think that the force of strength, especially a strength which draws blood, will result in the reconciliation of relationships, beyond your home? Some husbands use power. It does not bring

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/19/foreignpolicy.politics>

⁶ I do not view this sermon as a flight into dreamy idealism. Though Jesus' words were not intended, strictly speaking, as instructions in political/public policy, the so-called “Politics of Jesus” (there is a book by this title by the Mennonite theologian, Howard Yoder), makes more and more sense – especially given the complexity of today's world, and the gravity that nuclear weapons have weighed upon the human race. More than ever, “peace through strength” is a recipe for global human disaster – learning the politics of “loving our enemies” may be all that can save us in the end.

peace. Some pastors use power. It does not bring peace. Some political leaders use power. It does not bring peace. Generals use power. It does not bring peace.

Jesus taught us to love one another enough, even that we would give our lives for one another. This may mean figuratively, in sacrificial giving to one another. My time, my money, sacrificed for a greater cause. This may mean, God forbid, literally... laying down your life for another human being (see John 15.13). The peace that Jesus brings, is true peace. Whole peace. Lasting peace. It comes not in his teaching, not in his miraculous power over people or things. It comes in his life. His body, laid down for a higher truth. *He is our peace... in his flesh, he has made us one.*⁷ And his body, as the Church has affirmed, is alive in the world today. The Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12.27).

When will his body teach the world, again, about laying down life for one another? When will his Body again demonstrate that God's love can come in no other way? *She who will save her life will lose it... He who will lose his life shall find it* (Matthew 16.25). When will his Body, again, bring peace?

Jesus' peace will not begin by solving the Iraq war. It will not be revealed first in a lasting armistice in Israel. It will not come for starters between Pakistan and India. It will begin within. We take this affirmation way too lightly, if we affirm it at all. The singing of "Let Their Be Peace on Earth... and let it begin with me," comes too often, accompanied by rolled eyes, and skeptical sighs... yeah, right... the Protestants and the Catholics have been fighting for centuries in Ireland, and peace begins with me!? Yes, it does.

⁷ This sermon series began with a comment I made in a summer sermon (I can't remember which one!), that Christian faith is based not in principles, rules, laws, etc... but in the PERSON of Jesus Christ. (It may have been "Preaching to the Already Religious" – in which I made the comment that Jesus, himself, can be made into a "proposition.")

Yes. It. Does.

As one commentator says it, “Love is not a doctrine. Peace is not an international agreement. Love and Peace are beings which live as possibilities in us.”⁸

Just as our criminal justice system, as I recently told you, needs to be transformed from within – within the hearts of Americans, whose pent up vengeance and anger and unwillingness to understand and inability to have compassion work their way into public policy, so your transformed heart – a heart which believes in peace, a heart which practices peace across your kitchen table... around the office water fountain... across the aisle in Congress... your transformed heart is where World Peace begins.

Ours is an incarnational theology. God’s love is made real in this world in flesh. Jesus’ flesh. Your flesh. In the Body of Christ, dying, again, that this world may be at peace. It begins in your own heart. Never take for granted the power that such a change can bring to this world. *Blessed are the Peacemakers. For they shall be called Children of God* (Matthew 5.9).

May it be so.

⁸ Mary Caroline Richards, quoted in “The Living Pulpit,” “Peace, October-December, 1998,” p.28.