

PREREQUISITES TO PEACE

Isaiah 59:1-11 Luke 19:37-42

October 4, 2009 [World Communion Sunday]

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Isaiah 59:1-11 *See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ² Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. ³ For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. ⁴ No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity. ⁵ They hatch adders' eggs, and weave the spider's web; whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper. ⁶ Their webs cannot serve as clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. ⁷ Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. ⁸ The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. ⁹ Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. ¹⁰ We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. ¹¹ We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.*

Luke 19:37-42 *As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." ⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*

We were celebrating communion in our fellowship hall, the congregation seated in concentric circles surrounding the table. We had designed the service as more informal than usual so as to make children feel comfortable with the sacrament; indeed, we had encouraged parents to talk with their kids during the service and explain whatever was confusing to them. As the bread was being shared, one of our kindergarten children stood on his chair and handed his bread to the adult behind him, and as his mother tried to get him to sit down, we all could hear him say, "But I'm passing the piece!"

The liturgical sections were a bit confused in his mind, but he had the spirit of the occasion right. In communion we are not simply commemorating an event of long ago among Jesus and disciples, we are primarily anticipating the fulfillment of a dream that one day the harmony God intended in the work of creation would be realized, enmity between people would evaporate as the world awakened from its nightmares of violence, and peace would become as persistent then as war and destruction are today. We celebrate communion, in part, to recall the dream of God, that remembering we might be recalled to our senses.

Hence, the sacrament calls us to be dreamers, too – to dream the dream of God that the world might be at peace, that neighbors might be at peace, that families might be at peace, that our souls might be at peace. But instead, the visions that fill the minds of the world's inhabitants tend to be nightmares of violence, not dreams of peace. Historians say that the twentieth century, whose early years witnessed the "war to end all wars," completed itself as likely bloodiest of all centuries. We are nine years into the new century. How are we doing?

The tools by which humanity accomplishes violence have become much more imaginative, but the energy we put into building structures of peace has remained half-hearted. How late into the development of human society we have gone, yet we are still incapable of dreaming better dreams. Oh, it's not that humanity can't envision better futures, it's that we seem unwilling to pay the price for them. We are willing, it seems, to pay whatever the price of war, but peace is too expensive for us. We are willing to go any mile to protect what we have, but we tire quickly if we have to go very far assuring that our neighbor is treated justly. We expend our resources – spiritual and material – to assuage our fear, but our budget for peacemaking remains tight.

The dream of God is not going to be imposed on us. We have to choose it and sacrifice to achieve it. We have to trust God by trusting God's dream. Indeed, we have to choose that dream and trust it even though others do not. That is what stops us cold from being peacemakers, that we should expose ourselves to our fears and be vulnerable. But until we do, we are like the people Isaiah described: *“We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.”*

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century Jewish theologian, wrote: “The God we find in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament is a God who pleads with his people to do justice and live out love. This is a God whom Christians call the Servant King and that Jews should acknowledge as a God who limits his power so that we might have the dignity that goes with willingly choosing to do what is right and good.”

But that is not what we do. Elsewhere Isaiah uses other metaphors to describe God's dream: "*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*" [Isaiah 2:4] Today it works the other way around. The food that might grow from plowed ground is, instead, left fallow, or sown with mines. The swords continue to slash. Arguably, the world's lust for armament is what takes food from the mouths of the poor. Arguably, war is the greatest propagator of war.

Every country's patriotic songs sing of glorious battles and brave souls, and in such a world as this no one doubts that there have been heroes who protected the innocent from tyranny and battles that routed evil foes. But to make those songs alternative dreams to the one God calls us to pursue is to hear Isaiah's words as a dirge for lost goodness and failed justice: "*...we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.*" We talk of wars that have been fought and won but, of course, there is no such thing as winning a war anymore than one can win a fire. The much-practiced habits of our minds incline us to pursue enforcing our dreams with incipient violence; the triumphal words we use to express our dreams pushes God's dream aside. As William Coffin said, "Christians forget that it was the devil who tempted Jesus with unbounded wealth and power. And it is the devil in every American that makes us feel good about being so powerful."

What we Christians don't seem to appreciate is that to explore God's dream of peace and justice is not to be wandering dreamily and naively in some theological Never-Neverland. Peace is not a metaphysical problem; it is an ethical one. One of the tragic flaws of Christianity and Islam is their respective idolatrous claims that God is

limited to one preferred brand, and that within that brand only certain beliefs count, or words count, or ways of observance count. Of course, by limiting God to our preferences, the next easy step is to assume God is on our side, preferences us over all other peoples, only listens to our prayers, and blesses all our wars.

According to scripture, what matters to God is how we treat one another. What matters to God is if we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. What matters, Amos declared, is not our solemn assemblies, our observant festivals, our presumptive holiness, our how we have cared for the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the young, the dispossessed. The nut of the issue is in Isaiah's words from today's scripture: *See, the LORD's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*

In these times when political leadership has maintained that torture is a right but health care isn't, when dollars for war trumps dollars for education, food, medicine, and the arts, when the financial flourishing of a few is more important than the needs of the many, it seems that kindness and justice can be dismissed as mere daydreams of the naïve faithful. And I wonder, on this World Communion Day, this day of engagement with the dream of peace, if the church can find its heart and its voice and begin to dissipate this great ethical fog in which the world wanders with some gospel light. The anger expressed by Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Jesus against the ethical carelessness of their days should rouse our ethical ire if we can find the courage to detach ourselves from the dreams of power and war. In *Dreams From My Father*, President Obama warned of the diminishment that could occur within communities if the church

“refuse[s] to engage with real power and risk genuine conflict.” As Washington pastor Graylan Hagler puts it, “[Christians] are not called to be expedient. We’re called to be unreasonable.”

The world studies war because its values are confused and conflicted, and values, of course, are not free-floating, unhinged spirits flying about hither and yon – they either are rooted in the hearts of persons and expressed in their actions or they don’t, actually, exist. Let’s think about that as we celebrate at this table. Jesus, the host here, said, “Feed my sheep.” He said, “Love one another.” He said, “Carry the burden a second mile.” He said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” He said, “Whoever has done it to the least of my brethren has done it unto me.”

My friends, let our prayers be for peace. Let our words be of peace. Let our actions promote peace. Let our pleas to our leaders be for peace. Let our hearts and minds lust for peace. Not until our souls are knit together in him whom we call Prince of Peace, shall the dream of peace become our hope. “Peace does not come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability. We can’t just wish for peace. We have to will it, fight for it, suffer for it, demand it from our governments as if peace were God’s most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is.” [Wm. Coffin, *Credo*, p. 93].