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Matthew 5:9
September 16, 2018

Make Love, Not War!

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God."

So, what do *you* think of when you hear the word peace? The opposite of war? The absence of war? A symbol?

A famous rock-star, using the stage to make a political statement? A bumper sticker on the back of someone's car?

A bunch of burned-out hippies "making love not war" in a commune somewhere?

Perhaps your conceptions of peace are a little less exotic: A tranquil garden? Inner contentment with who you are?

Whatever you might think of when you hear the word "peace," and whatever notions our culture might have about it, "peace" seems to be one of those few words that usually evokes images of unqualified good.

I mean, who doesn't want peace, after all? While many people, too many people, are willing to use violence to try and achieve peace, there are precious few people who would say that they don't *want* peace.

Everyone along the spectrum from pacifism on the one end to Christian militarism on the other *wants peace*; they simply disagree about how peace is to be attained.

I think you would be hard-pressed to find many people who would seriously say that they actively longed for chaos and violence.

So, let's agree, the vast majority of us *want* peace. But Jesus isn't just talking about *wanting* peace here.

I think he assumes that we all want it, that it is a good thing for which we were created and toward which we ought to strive.

But, the people whom he calls "blessed" are those who go out and make it happen.

A quick aside: I find it interesting that many Christians demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings.

But, I haven't heard one of them demand that the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.

"Blessed are the merciful" in a courtroom? "Blessed are the peacemakers" in the Pentagon?

Friday is *International Day of Peace, or, World Peace Day*. It was first established by the United Nations in 1981.

The UN declared that "Peace Day should be devoted to commemorating and strengthening the ideals of peace both within and among all nations."

The *International Day of Peace* is also known as a *Day of Ceasefire*. On Ceasefire Day, the world calls for, and prays for, the guns to fall silent everywhere, at least for one day.

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom.

Often used as a greeting word or a departing word in much the same way we would utter “hello” or “goodbye,” it is a broad term related to health, prosperity, harmony, and wholeness.

It means perfect welfare, serenity, fulfillment, freedom from trouble, and liberation from anything which hinders contentment.

When a Jew says “Shalom” he or she is wishing on another the full presence, peace, and prosperity of God.

The famous Aaronic benediction in Numbers 6:24-26 brings out this idea very clearly:

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-25).

And Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9).

Into a world that is ugly with violence and hate, Jesus sends us as peacemakers.

You may say “Well that’s nonsense. All you have to do is see all the so-called Christians who have been involved in bloody conflict in history, all done in the name of God”.

Then we have Joshua and David and Gideon in the Old Testament, who all went into battle because God told them to.

And what about all the other bloodshed of the Old Testament? It’s full of violence, much done in the name of God!

What about God himself who floods the earth and wipes out all those people? What about Sodom and Gomorrah?

That doesn’t appear very peaceful!

And Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers”!

You may well say, “Tell that to the radical Muslims of the world! Tell that to Al-Qaeda! To suicide bombers, to conflict ravaged Israel and Palestine.

“Tell that to our world today which is not exactly peaceful!”

And you know what? That’s exactly what He did! He told us. But 2000 years later we are still not listening!

As someone once said, “When Jesus urged us to love our enemies, he most certainly did not mean to kill them.”

We no longer live under “an eye for an eye.”

But if that is true, how do we answer the following questions?

Would the Jesus we read about in the Gospels ever, under any circumstances, stick a bayonet into another human being?

Would he drop a bomb on village full of people?

Would he shoot someone in the face, or run someone over in a tank?

Or even bulldoze their homes?

The answer is unequivocally, No.

It is interesting that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, nearly the whole world identified with us, sympathized with us, even suggested that “we are all Americans today.”

Many of those who offered us their prayers and consolation knew what we were going through, as such terror had already been so familiar to them.

Yet, rather than accepting their invitation to be in solidarity with them, both in terms of our shared experiences, and our shared efforts to build a world free of such terror, we chose to see ourselves as exceptional.

We choose to see ourselves as people to whom this sort of thing must not happen, and thus to respond with as much military furor and might as we could muster, determined to make someone pay for what had been done to us, and “to bring them to justice.”

Seventeen years and two long wars later, more Americans have died than perished on that fateful day, as well as countless other Iraqi and Afghan sisters and brothers.

And it's not at all clear that we are any safer now as a result of having squandered so much to accomplish so little.

Imagine, if instead, we had sought to use our vast resources to build up rather than tear down those same places in our world, seeking instead of defeating and dominating them, rather to befriend and empower them.

And Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

The word "make" in the term "peacemakers" comes from the Greek verb that means "to do" or "to make."

It is a word that mandates action and initiative. Someone has to drag the combatants to the table and give them a reason to put down their arms.

Notice Jesus did not say "Blessed are the peace-wishers or the peace-hopers or the peace-dreamers or the peace-lovers or the peace-talkers."

Peace must be made. Peace never happens by chance. A peacemaker is never passive. They always take the initiative. They are up and doing.

So, when these two words are taken together, "peace" and "maker," it describes one who actively pursues peace.

The peacemaker pursues more than the absence of conflict.

They don't avoid strife (in fact, sometimes, peacemaking will create strife).

They aren't merely seeking to appease the warring parties.

They aren't even trying to accommodate everyone.

Instead, as William Barclay translates this verse, "They are people who produce right relationships in every sphere of life."

Being a peacemaker involves working *for* God's vision for his world.

It means pursuing justice, wholeness, and harmony in our relationships, seeking reconciliation and restoration both when we wrong others and when they wrong us.

It means turning the other cheek, choosing to be wronged, rather than be a source of hostility.

It means doing the hard work of reconciling with our enemies without resorting to violence.

It means getting involved politically and socially, promoting whatever peace can be achieved and always working for human flourishing in whatever context we find ourselves.

It means sacrificially pursuing the good of others, sometimes at personal expense.

Unfortunately, all too often, we have been afraid to follow the radical example of Jesus.

We have been too afraid to speak out against the dominant values of our friends, our families, our society.

Perhaps we have been too afraid of losing respect and influence from the powerful in this world.

But Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

So how can we be peacemakers?

How can we embody this new possibility for the world, this new way of being human that Jesus points to here in the Beatitudes?

Most of us will not have the opportunity to influence the foreign policies of influential governments (although some might).

For most of us, peacemaking will occur in the fairly “ordinary” contexts of everyday events and relationships.

For most of us, peacemaking will involve doing what good we can in the contexts God has placed us, the doors he opens up for us.

In the fifth century, the monk Telemachus, who had been living by himself in the desert trying to devote himself to God, decided that he really couldn't serve God without serving other people.

He abandoned his life of solitude and traveled to the city of Rome, arriving just in time to watch a victory celebration where Gothic prisoners were being forced to battle one another to the death as gladiators.

Ironically, Rome considered itself a Christian city by that time, but the churches emptied to see this bloody spectacle.

When the monk saw the crowd of 80,000 roaring for the blood of the two gladiators as they fought each other, he was horrified.

Telemachus leapt into the arena and placed himself between the two men, pleading with them to stop the conflict.

Furious over the delay in their entertainment, the spectators stoned Telemachus to death.

Three days later the emperor declared him a martyr and did away with the gladiatorial contests for good. Telemachus had achieved his goal.

Today, the days of the gladiators are long past. But what about us? Where is our arena? Where do we carry on this work of peace making?

Wherever we find ourselves there will be conflict, disharmony, fear, and confusion.

Our job, as kingdom people, is to bear witness through our lives to the Prince of Peace because we believe that it is in living as Christ did that the world begins to be transformed into something beautiful and good and hopeful (like the vision we read in our Old Testament text from Isaiah).

We are not charged with the task of bringing the kind of peace that only God can bring; but we are called to embody, as in all the beatitudes, a kingdom-way-of-being-in-the world.

We are called to be peacemakers because we are children of a God of peace. God's children do what God does, and there is no more God-like work for us to do in the world than peacemaking.

My hope and my prayer is that all of us here today, and Santa Teresa Hills and the entire community of faith in San Jose, will grow in God's peace, will try harder to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

And will be blessed peacemakers. And that our homes, our churches and our city will bring about God's peace on earth as it is in heaven.

This will be an extremely difficult task.

It will require dedicated and tireless struggle.

Fortunately, Jesus promises help; he gives us his peace as a source of strength: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14: 27).

May God help us to be peacemakers this week, this year, and beyond.

Amen!