

“The Roadmap for Peace”
A Sermon by Rev. Richard Clewell
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Scripture: Luke 24: 36b-48 (1 John 3:1-10)

The roadmap for peace immediately makes us think of the troubled Middle East and of a solution for the Jewish-Palestinian upheaval. Too often the problem is that such plans are imposed by others rather than being owned by the parties involved. Those in power positions expect the alienated to accept their proposals as good for them even though they have no input or voice in the negotiation of the plan. It is too soon evident that each party whether represented or imposed upon has its own conception of what peace would mean for them and those perceptions often have no meeting point. Inevitably this disparity is based in self-interest and survival at the expense of the others' wishes or needs.

This describes human experience throughout the world's history where strife and warfare have occurred all too frequently to the detriment of any meaningful peace and expansion of justice. Such history gives credibility to the words of the prophet Jeremiah when he declared, "How can you say, we are wise and the law of the Lord is with us? But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what wisdom is in them? I will give what they have to others because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 8: 8-12, ed.)

Those words from Israel's past history are just as true in this day and age. Human behavior has not changed. Peace is always sought after but remains elusive as the far out-numbering years of warfare and conflict attest. Man-made peace agreements seldom hold for very long. It can only make us wonder if there can ever be a genuine roadmap for peace.

I believe our scripture texts today may give us direction toward a better understanding of real peace for us as individuals and as a community of nation states. Hear the words of Jesus after his resurrection as they are described in Luke's Gospel. (Read Luke 24: 36b-48). After convincing his disciples that he was indeed a living entity for their lives, he is able to get them to finally understand the Scriptures and the purpose of his death and resurrection – to make forgiveness of sins through repentance a reality and the hope for all people. His followers would receive the power to witness and model this transformation to the world. In the experience of the apostles' witness, their lives were changed and this dynamic sustained them in the trials they experienced. They shared what God had done in saving, sending and blessing them with joy and peace in the process of faith.

The epistle text (1John 3: 1-10) reinforces this understanding that as disciples of Christ, you and I have been liberated from the power of sin and are "God's children" now, though not yet fully what we shall be in God's time. Because Christians know that they are growing into a future whose form resembles him in whom they dwell, they can withstand uncertainty and loss and even death with vigor and hope continually replenished by God. When we center ourselves, not in secular society's immediate interests or anxious fears, but in God's claims and intentions for us, we remember the One to whom we are finally accountable and from whom we draw our strength. Doing what is right is the verification that one has been born anew by God. Of all people, Christians should know that they live out of a faith that does not rest on a strict system of merits and rewards, but on the confidence that God continues to love us with an unearned, gracious love which we are now empowered to reciprocate through deeds of peace and justice in the bristly, tormented world. The on-going task for Christians is to go to all humankind with God's call to repentance and offer of forgiveness, acceptance and renewed relationship.

What does this mean in terms of finding peace? For individuals struggling to make sense out of their turmoil between intentions and behaviors, their tendencies to control and to manipulate, their conflicts between love and hate, between giving and taking, between freedom and security, the call of the Gospel is clear. St. Augustine shared this insight, “Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself.”

Stop kidding yourself, be honest, and if you don’t like what you see, turn away in repentance and ask God in forgiveness to walk with you and transform life with understanding and compassion. When one experiences God’s love and acceptance, one no longer needs to be top dog and the ability to love and be at peace with others is possible.

I find it most interesting that three major faith groups – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim- all equate a proof of loving God as the ability to love brother, sister, and neighbor. When we are at peace with our God, we can be at peace with one another. John Buchanan, senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, made this observation to his congregation following the dedication of a new building for a synagogue which had met in his church for several years, “I thanked the Jewish community for reminding Christians that faith is not merely a one-way ticket to heaven, but a way to live in peace and harmony with all of God’s children - - -We believe God has a will and an intent for creation that is larger and more glorious than anyone’s particular religion and that it has everything - - - to do with reconciliation and peace and justice for which there is no lovelier word in any language than the Hebrew term “shalom.”” Perhaps it’s time for many calling themselves Christian, Jewish, or Muslim to shed their blindness and confess before God their condemnation of people of other faiths or convictions as inferior, as evil, as bound for hell. In view of God’s love for us, we need to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” John makes it clear in the fourth chapter of this epistle what the core behavior of genuine Christianity entails, “We love God because he first loves us. Those who say, “I love God” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Christ is this: those who love God must love their brother and sisters also.” (1John 4: 19-21)

It seems to me that this leaves no room for arrogance or pride in our relationships with others. It calls for self examination, repentance and openness to others whether they are conservative or liberal, whether friends who agree or those who openly disagree or give us a hard time. When we have experienced and continue to be nurtured by God’s gracious love as demonstrated in Jesus Christ, how can we withhold from others whether family, friends, employees, or even perceived opponents or labeled enemies? We human beings all have the capacity to sin and oppose God’s way. I have enough trouble dealing with my own faith journey – it’s so much easier to blame someone else as the problem. I’m reminded of Jesus words, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Mtt. 7:5) If we respond to the transforming power of God’s spirit, we will come to know the way of peace with others.

There is another meaning for these texts in connection to the relationships between nation states in finding peaceful solutions. All major world religions espouse these principles. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each declare the love of neighbor as proof of relationship with God. Adherents and governments claiming these values often sacrifice them to perceived self-interests, economic needs, and power plays. History is a continuing log of humanity’s failed attempts to get along constantly interrupted by political one-up-manship and the rich and powerful exploiting others. Nations have risen to prominence and power and they have fallen in their misuse of the authority given them. This is one way I believe that God is working in this world to show humankind they cannot endure without forgiveness and transformation. Without such principles there can be no genuine peace or justice.

As citizens of a nation that loudly proclaims to be Christian in tradition and practice, we need to raise questions with our representative leaders in a call to accountability to these cherished principles. In calling for a national day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer on April 30, 1863, the words of Abraham

Lincoln echo our national need, “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God - - - We have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us. It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness - - -.”

Our faith should inform our practice as well as our proclamation. If all human beings are created equal, then the faith principle of love of neighbor is foundational. How do such values inform the issues of health care, the growing divide between the rich and poor, the distribution of world resources, the disparity of power and attempts to identify who is evil and to unilaterally impose our will on other nations?

David Dark in his book, *The Gospel According to America*, makes this observation, “the confessing community can speak candidly and demand candor when career politicians and celebrity pundits feel trapped by a public that seems to only want promises of absolute victory in the war on evil, further proclamation of America’s moral superiority, and assurance of the innate goodness of the American people. The confessing community is called disrupt the feedback loop of self-congratulation, to speak back to the Us and Them sales pitch, and bear witness to the scandalously multipartisan posture of God’s war on terror made known in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.” The late Christian activist, William Sloane Coffin, in speaking to these issues, declared, “For American liberty to be restored and extended, American Christians need to carry on with their country the same lovers’ quarrel that the prophets of old carried on with Israel, and that God consistently carries on with the whole world. We must say Yes to what we can, and No to what we must. We must see that when a government betrays the ideals of a country, it is an act of loyalty to oppose the government. We must take the road less traveled and be more concerned with our country saving its soul than losing face. “I tremble for my country when I recall that God is just” (Thomas Jefferson).”

The roadmap for peace is based on actions which are informed by faith. True jihad is “the better way,” not holy war; both Judaism and Christianity rest on the cornerstone of love for neighbor. Our actions must be a manifestation of God’s compassionate presence in the midst of our world. Patient actions are actions through which the healing, consoling, comforting, reconciling and unifying love of God can touch the heart of humanity. They are actions through which the fullness of time can show itself and God’s justice and peace can guide our world. They are actions by which good news is brought to the poor, liberty to the prisoners, new sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and God’s year of favor is proclaimed (Lk. 4: 18-19). They are actions which remove the fear, suspicion, and power-hungry competition that cause an escalating arms race, an increasing separation between the wealthy and the poor, and an intensifying cruelty between the powerful and the powerless. They are actions that lead people to listen to each other, speak with each other, and heal each other’s wounds. In short, they are actions based on faith that knows God’s presence in our lives and wants this presence to be felt by individuals, communities, societies, and nations.

Call me a dreamer or out of touch with reality if you would. But I believe this response is the genuine roadmap for peace in God’s world. Karl Barth understood that “Jesus gospel is represented falsely whenever it is viewed as a truth among other truths, a novel opinion among others, a whispering chaplain to human instrumentalities, or a private faith option with nothing to say to anyone’s national pride or spending habits. It isn’t a position, but a cosmic reality. - - - God’s Kingdom sets a question mark up against all our mythic realities, principalities, and rabble-rousing words. This kingdom undermines all our death-dealing idolatries. It belongs to no nation, and it will allow no other

allegiances to stand alongside it. Its scope is without end, and it is under way. It makes all things new. It is stronger than death.”

My prayer is that we as Christians might follow this roadmap and cry out with anticipation and joy, “Even so come, Lord Jesus.”

Amen

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