

A Sermon by Rev. Richard D. Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Sermon: “Making Peace in the Church and the World”
October 5, 2008 – World Communion Sunday
Scripture Texts: Isaiah 56:1-8, Galatians 3:23-28

As we come together as a community of faith on this World Communion Sunday, we are reminded that today Christians throughout this earth gather as we do to celebrate new life in Christ and the oneness we have at the Lord’s Table. Christ continues to reveal himself and offer us peace whenever and wherever bread is broken and eaten in his name. Just as he offered bread and peace to those broken by the forces of hatred and destruction, we as Christ’s people are to carry the reality of peace to the people and places in pain.

In keeping with this calling, the Presbyterian Church designates this day annually for the Peacemaking Offering in order to affirm and implement actions for peace in our community and in the world. Jesus reminded his disciples and us as his followers, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14: 27,28)

In light of our current experiences in our church denominations and the world we may well wonder about any prospects of peace. In the churches where faith unity is to be the norm, we encounter divisions and fights over who are in and who are out. Being one in Christ appears to have been displaced by who has “the truth” and by contentiousness where perceived winners have the power and self-designated losers take their marbles and leave. We seem to spend more energy trying to stifle internal conflict than in sharing Christ’s love and promised peace with others in the world. We prove to be much more humanly exclusive than faithfully inclusive as God loves.

In our world fear is the great motivator in every dimension of individual and national/international existence. Terrorism is dealt with by counter-terrorism. Warfare is seen as the primary means of handling issues. Greed reigns supreme – “I’ll get mine and the heck with you.” The gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” widens and the distribution of resources is skewed and consumed by the powerful. Financial stability today stands in peril and the global economy is threatened. Creation itself is imperiled by human abuse of resources of the earth and the results of human excesses and the pollution of earth, sea, and sky. In this scenario we are reminded of the prophet Jeremiah’s words, “They have treated the wounds

of my people carelessly saying “peace, peace” when there is no peace.”
(Jeremiah 6:14)

What then shall we say to these things? Our scripture texts inform us about the nature of the peace of the kingdom which God is creating. In our Old Testament reading, the third author in Isaiah points out an alternative humanness to the culture and world system which has lost its way in terms of dehumanizing its citizens. Isaiah finds hope in the exile of God’s people. Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *Mandate to Difference*, declares “that the exile as the true character and venue of our humanness is an alternative to the dominant imagination that we live in a centered, coherent world in which we can establish security on our own terms. It matters greatly if the metaphor of exile, deportation, and displacement is an accurate characterization for the context of ministry. The claim of success and security, so powerful among us, causes us not to notice the cast out and often not to acknowledge our own denial or anxiety about coming displacement.” Friends, our lives in Christ are not to be focused on ourselves and our security but on the Lord who gives us inner peace and outward concern for justice for others. We are to march to the beat of a different drummer.

The prophet goes on to point out that the way of God and people of that divine way is welcome and openness to others who are not like us – a radical alternative to the ideology of conformity that takes all those not like ourselves to be dangerous and unacceptable lesser others. Isaiah focuses on the issue as it concerns the otherness of sexuality as well as the otherness of immigrants and those with alternative social practices. He declares that the foreigner or eunuch are not excluded or forgotten in their relation to God. This certainly is an earlier and consistent parallel to Peter’s inclusion finally of Gentiles in the New Testament. The way of genuine peace is inclusion, not exclusion. May our churches hear this word and find their oneness in common faith in the Christ who reconciles bringing genuine peace, unity and purity.

For the prophet the memory of the exodus is what marks the covenantal community as exhibiting neighborly generosity which focuses on the marginalized who are without social access, power and advocacy. This covenant way of interdependence and mutuality stands in stark contrast to dominant acquisitiveness that regards everyone else as a competitor or threat to one’s self-security. God’s peace is found in belonging with and for each other. Would that we Christians would act on this truth and teach the greater society and our government the wisdom of this way of justice and concern for all people.

Finally, the prophet calls for the practice of Sabbath rest, the pause for receiving holy gifts, a drawing apart to be fully human with growing awareness of the divine relationship. He goes on to say that the practice of prayer binds us in love to God and in love to neighbor; to live life on terms other than our own. Such yielding to the largeness of God's rule overcomes our cultural tribalism which limits the scope of our concern and teaches us that to yield is to lose.

What do these statements of an Old Testament prophet mean for us today? What Isaiah asks is not easy or always obvious. The move from the dominant modes of our culture to the alternative testimony of the coming kingdom of God will be difficult and complex. But is the hope for peace in both the church and our world. This alternative way of exile is a choice that can be made for a full life in contrast to the fable of a safe, ordered, conformed existence focused on self and acquisition provided by societal ideology. Believing and behaving that others belong with us and for us, that they are welcomed as we are welcomed is a healthy and God-given alternative to exclusivism which demeans and pretends that others are not there. Generosity to our neighbor and others who may not be like us creates possibilities and futures that self-serving acquisition and withholding can never offer. In Sabbath disengagement from production, rather than fall behind the competition, we can redeem our lives from the frantic rat-race. In the practice of prayer we yield ourselves to an awareness of God's continual presence and the relationship based on ever-growing love and an inner peace which attunes us to our pilgrim way and divine calling.

The Apostle Paul echoes God's promised way in our text in Galatians. Before Christ came, the Law served as a boundary-limited way to live for people trying to follow and connect with God in a chaotic tribal culture. But in Christ's coming, faith restored relationship and God's love was demonstrated for all. And so Paul declares that in Christ, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

This way of peace for the Church and the world is captured in World-wide Communion today where Christians of every race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other humanly perceived differences come together as one in Christ. The old has passed and is still passing away; the new has come and is still coming. We are truly "Breaking the Bread of New Creation."

Our peacemaking offering today reaches out to others to share from our blessed abundance. Fairmount's portion of this offering has been designated toward the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa. The larger Church

through our denomination reaches out to people everywhere with needed services and assistance. It is the alternative way of doing ministry and sharing without contingencies or hidden agendas. It's going out of the love we have experienced in Christ and wish others to experience as well. It is the way which upholds justice for the poor and marginalized and demands systemic change and the uplifting of all people

May the Church grow in its practice of God's peace and may the world come to a knowledge of the alternative way of God's coming kingdom of peace where all are valued and accepted in faith. May God cause this to be so for us and for all people. Amen

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