

Peace When There Is No Peace

Bonnie Beiswenger
Centre Street Church, UCC
Dec. 3, 2023

“Peace on earth, goodwill to men.” It’s the proclamation of the angels that adorns our Christmas cards and resounds in the carols. Peace on earth—something just about everyone wants, and yet we never even come close to achieving it. If anything, we seem to be careening ever faster toward annihilation.

Throughout the Old Testament, prophets such as Jeremiah cry, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace,” warning Israel that its greed and self centeredness would destroy Jerusalem.¹ And how many times since then has Jerusalem, which means “city of peace,” been racked with violence?

And here we are in 2023, living in a world on fire. Thousands of innocents being slaughtered in Israel, Palestine, and Ukraine while power-hungry tyrants throughout the world rattle their sabers, calmly waiting for their turn at bat. The sad reality is that human beings cannot—no, *will* not—recognize what makes for peace. Lately, knowing firsthand the ripple effects of deep grief that comes with the sudden death of just one person, and then multiplying that grief more than 15,000 times weighs on my heart.

Jesus knew that same sadness. In chapter 19, Luke writes of Jesus weeping as he overlooks Jerusalem, knowing the destruction that was soon to befall it. Jesus says, “If you ... had only recognized ... the things that make for peace! ... Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies ... will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”²

Jesus knew that he was not the kind of messiah that Israel was hoping for—a Davidic king who would vanquish Rome, their version of Goliath, and bring them lasting peace.

With the exception of his disciples and some loyal followers, people just didn’t get it—that victory through violence never lasts and only begets more violence. They didn’t absorb Jesus’s teachings that non-violence, justice, and love are required for true peace. And the world still hasn’t got the memo.

¹ Jeremiah 6:14

² Luke 19:41–44

Maybe mankind will never get it. So how do we handle a situation that seems so hopeless and beyond our control? We do what is in our control. We go on living in the light of Christ, caring for each other, dispelling hate, and striving for justice with all our hearts, even knowing, as Christ warned, that it just may cost us—and that’s okay.

Because, though it may seem like an unending struggle, we have a very special gift that Christ left us—*his* peace. Just before he left the world, he told his followers, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”³ Christ was not talking about worldly peace, but a personal peace.

Peace on earth is beyond our control, but we can be at peace in our own lives if we truly absorb the teachings of Christ. Because the very same things that rob the world of peace will surely rob us of our inner peace—greed, pride, self-centeredness, and desire.

As some of you know, I have a little Buddhist in me, and my favorite teacher is Ajahn Brahm. In his book *Open the Door of Your Heart*, he teaches that “peace is the highest happiness” and he poses a question to his readers: Which would you rather have, happiness or peace? My first thought was, *Well, don’t the two go together?*

They can, but what usually happens is that we drive ourselves to distraction chasing things we’re sure will bring us happiness—a college degree, a high paying career, a dream vacation, an ideal relationship, success for our children, a nest egg for a happy retirement. Nothing wrong with those goals *if* we keep in mind that any happiness we gain from them will not last.

Peace *is* the highest happiness because it does last. It can always be there. Peace of mind—peace from mind—the kind of peace Christ gives is ours to receive and hold onto. I have pictured Jesus holding out his hands to me and saying, “Bonnie, here’s my peace. I’m giving it to you, but not as the world gives.” And as I reach out my hands to take it from him, I realize that I must first let go of the heavy baggage I’m carrying—my problems, ambitions, judgments. I can’t hold both at the same time.

You can’t find happiness in sickness, turmoil, grief, and loss, but you can always find Christ’s peace there. It is always there for us. No one can take it from us but ourselves. You can’t find happiness in imperfection and problems either. And we all have problems in life that just have no immediate solutions—a child going down the wrong path who won’t heed your advice, a terminal illness for you or a loved one, a relationship you just can’t make work. If there is nothing you can do, you can find peace in accepting that and just letting it go. Peace within imperfection.

³ John 14:27

We can't fix the world—even our own immediate world that is so full of unkindness and hate right now. But as the Dalai Lama says, “Do not let the behavior of others destroy your inner peace.” We may be powerless to change the world, but we can care. We can bring comfort, be kind, and be love.

Sarina mentioned in her message last month about how she likes walking in cemeteries and reading the stones, and I do too. The common epitaph on a gravestone is the carving RIP, rest in peace, but I think those three words should be for the living as well. Our peace will not yet be eternal, but we can take time in our living to rest in God's peace and carry it with us on our journey.

One of today's choral pieces is called “In the Stillness.” Take in the lyrics:

Just beyond the frantic pace our restless feet have trod,
lie deep still pools of quietness, the dwelling place of God.
Meet me in the stillness, Lord. Be the air I breathe.
Meet me in the stillness, Lord. Free me to receive.⁴

Friends, let us free ourselves to receive Christ's not-of-this-world peace. Be still and breathe in God, and rest in His peace. The peace that passes all understanding, the peace that no one can take from you, the peace that is always there. And in the wise words of Thomas Merton, “If you yourself are at peace, then there is at least some peace in the world.”

⁴ Mark A. Miller, “In the Stillness.”