

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009
Lessons: Amos 2:6-8; 8:4-8 and Luke 4:14-21

WHO'S KISSING?

Children light candles for peace in this time of Advent, the Season of Hope. What do we pray for them, the children? What hopes for peace do we offer them, and what do we even mean by peace in a world that creates conflicts and fuels hostilities day after day and year after year without ceasing?

By lighting an Advent candle for peace, we have offered to God a symbolic prayer for *something* we say we want, *something* that seems in short supply in our world, but what is it we desire? Listen to just a few of the ways we use the word *peace*.

- “Go away, and give me some peace!”
- “Ah, out here by the lake I feel at peace.”
- “I have not come to fight. I’ve come to make peace with you.”
- “What would I like for Christmas? Oh, nothing much: world peace, maybe, or a cheap and easy cure for global warming.”
- “The United Nations is sending in a peacekeeping force of 1,000 troops.”
- “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.”

Just from that small sampling, we can see that peace, to us, is respite from annoyance, retreat from the stresses of life, reconciliation between people who have been at odds, an ideal so unrealistic we make cynical jokes about it, the calm imposed by force upon hostile groups in a society, and something undefined but treasured we believe God wants and calls us to serve. For what did we light the candle? Do those who pray for peace oppose war? Do they believe peace is made by stopping a war or by winning it? And if we think winning makes peace, does that notion carry over into our personal relationships and business dealings, and should it govern our church decisions? Do I make peace by getting my way and making others yield to my interests? If so, how do those others then find peace?

The Bible’s word for peace is *shalom*, and modern Christians have liked that word so much that we have brought it from Hebrew into English. Even spell-checkers know the word “shalom” and one of mine will automatically correct it when misspelled. The word family of shalom derives its varied meanings from the concept of *wholeness*. Picture humanity undivided, not broken, not tearing at each other’s lives and the fabric of community and

society. As a relational concept, wholeness implies harmony, not conformity, not sameness. Imagine how the music of worship would be impoverished if our choir always sang in unison rather than in harmony. Peace does not require or even support the restriction of freedom and creativity the authoritarian seek to impose upon us. We do not need to think all alike in order to have peace, and if we are forced to pretend we do think all alike, that pretense is not peace. Harmony blends variety, and that blending makes the music rich and full.

Is peace a condition of wholeness and harmony within the individual person or a condition of wholeness and harmony between and among people in the widening circles of human interaction? Shalom is both. It is peace of mind and justice in the marketplace. It fosters self-respect and mutual respect. It speaks of the calming of a troubled mind and heart but also the calming of hostilities and resentments in every gathering of people from the family to the world of nations.

The title of this sermon asks an unusual question: “Who’s kissing?” I’m not talking about romance or even affection. I’m working from Psalm 85, the source of our Call to Worship: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

Oh boy. “Righteousness” translates another of the Bible’s relational terms we misunderstand as something private – some virtue I can have apart from you, apart from the nature and quality of my relationships with other people and the way I treat everyone from my family members to strangers and store clerks stressed by the Christmas rush to groups in society I don’t understand. Well, it’s not that way. Righteousness is relational; if I try to make it my own thing, self-contained and self-satisfied, then it’s called “self-righteousness,” which is a condition that, left uncorrected, can kill the human soul. Self-righteous is mean because it feeds its pride on other people’s faults, failings, imperfections, and sins. It swells its own ego but making other people smaller, less worthy, and supposedly less loved by God. Self-righteousness misunderstands God’s love as approval, and the soul infected with self-righteousness grants others approval occasionally and disapproval regularly, but it withholds love. The real thing – righteousness as the Bible presents it – does not swell the ego but, rather, treats the other person rightly. Because righteousness is defined in each case by relationships, our relationship with God into which Jesus Christ brings us as his sisters and brothers now determines who other people are to us.

The stranger is a child of God I do not know. That definition does not mean every stranger is a good person or one to be trusted. Righteousness is not naive or foolish. We can’t make peace by pretending there are no conflicts in our world, no people whose desire is to abuse, hurt, rob, or destroy. Even so and in exactly our situations of fear and suspicion, it is our relationship with God in Christ that defines who people are to us.

Righteousness is strongly tied to justice and sometimes used as a synonym for justice. That linkage is crucial to understanding why righteousness and peace would kiss each other in a world ruled by God's redemptive love and faithfulness. Why are those two kissing?

Throughout the history of families, clans, tribes, confederations, nations, and international alliances, peace has done a lot of cheating on justice. Fickle would be too nice a word for it. Peace has lusted after victory and moved in with dominance and authoritarian control. Peace has betrayed righteousness by kissing power. I won't push the metaphor here, but I'm sure you get the point. The relationship between peace and victory over others is adulterous, which is to say triumph by force and the ensuing order maintained by fear do not make peace. They procreate resentment, bitterness, and hatred. They spawn revenge.

Without justice, there can be no peace. Without mutual understanding and respect, there can be no harmony in any relationship or society. "You leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone" may be better than open conflict, but it is not peace. "You do as I say, and we'll get along just fine" is not peacemaking.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen has expounded his belief that this recession was spawned by steadily increasing inequality in the economic conditions of our nation and world. The rich got richer, the middle class fell behind, and the poor were left in the dust. Sen has remarked, "An economy divided against itself cannot stand." Such an economy that rewarded the few lavishly at the expense of the many (and justified itself by averaging the inequality) is exactly the condition Amos the prophet warned the kingdom of Israel would bring it to destruction under the judgment of God. That happened eight centuries before Jesus was born, and it happened when people learned to play games with money so they would win big while most of the people suffered. Archeologists have found from that time a sudden inequality in the size of the Israelites' houses. I will not insult your intelligence or prolong the sermon by elaborating comparison with our present situation.

We need peace in our economy, and peace requires justice. Without justice, there can be no peace, and God's eye, the prophets assure us, is never on the average that balances the suffering of some with the extravagance of others. God's eye is on the cheated, the exploited, and the desperate.

Jesus announces in his hometown that God has sent him to bring release to the captive and freedom to the trapped. He spent his time with the crowds in the streets and villages, not with the powerful in their fine homes and plush offices. This morning, our children lit a candle for peace. I believe they have committed us to getting peace married to justice rather than trying to follow along behind conquest. May God show us ways to make real peace and give us faith's courage to pursue them. Amen.