

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2010
Lessons: Jeremiah 8:19—9:3, John 1:14 and Luke 10:1-9

THE SKILL FOR MAKING PEACE

There is all the difference in the world between getting what one wants by overcoming opposition from another party and making peace. Trouble is, the world does not often see the difference. So, people and nations continue to fight for peace.

The last time I can remember that I deliberately threw a punch into another person's face (not in the play of boxing but in anger), I was twelve and he thirteen. My punch landed and finished the fight, and I recall there was a small thrill to it, a flush of tiny triumph as though I had accomplished something worthwhile. The other boy and I never fought again, never argued again; we also never played together again, and I don't recall that we spoke to each other after that day. I suppose that in a bizarre fashion, it could be said that my punch made peace between us, but only to the extent that estrangement without aggression may be called peace.

Not all fights end that way. Friends who fight often make up, and even nations do something similar when, after the killing has ceased, they find matters of mutual self-interest that make working together advantageous for both. Do people simply forget and move on? Do they forgive? I have never been to the memorial atop the sunken battleship Arizona that serves as a grave for the 1,177 of its crew that died in the attack on Pearl Harbor, but I have been told and can easily imagine that standing there is a very moving experience. I doubt that any who were old enough to be aware of what was happening on December 7, 1941 have forgotten that day, just as I am sure no one in Japan old enough to remember has forgotten Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As boys born the year after World War II, we often integrated the war into our play. We might launch a barrage of snowballs at another group of boys (or girls) and yell, "Bombs over Tokyo!" It was part of the fun, because we were young and secure and had never lived in a city being bombed.

If war brings peace or, as we like to say, "keeps the peace," why is there not more peace in a world that has suffered countless wars great and small? If conflicts are resolved by war, why does warfare never cease on this earth? If victories bring progress, why is there still so much misery? Did you realize that in our modern world there no such thing as a

necessary famine? All famines that kill hundreds or thousands and sometimes have killed millions of people are political acts of mass murder. There is enough food for the world. People are starved for political and economic reasons, not because of true scarcity.

After Moses has led the children of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, God delivers them from certain death at the Sea of Reeds (we used to say the Red Sea). The Egyptian soldiers, seeking to pursue the Israelites are drowned when the waters return. Exodus says:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:
“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

The rabbis added insightfully to the tale, saying the angels in heaven ask God if they too might join in singing this triumphal “Song of the Sea,” to which God replies, “How can you sing when my children are dying?” It’s not the punch I remember but the thrill of winning the tiny fight which the boy who lived next door to me celebrated as a victory for “our side.” Why did that feel good? Surely, in warfare the thrill of battle and the glory of triumph sicken the heart of God.

When Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim the good news of God’s coming with love and mercy, he did something very strange to them. So they could truly represent him in the way he represented God, Jesus deliberately put them at a disadvantage with the people in the towns they were to visit. He took away their resources for sustaining themselves, making them dependent upon the good will and generosity of those they were sent to benefit. Why? The quick and easy answer is that he wanted them to trust God, which surely is true, but don’t stop there. The Bible never calls for a response to God that does not lead to a corresponding change in our relations with other human beings. Never. Jesus pairs the two greatest commandments: love God wholeheartedly *and* love your neighbor as you care for yourself. That two-fold commandment radiates to everything in our life as God’s people. Nothing done for God is complete until it works toward healing, justice, and reconciliation among people. The call to invest our hopes in Jesus Christ is not answered until our hopes embrace and include the needs and hopes of others. Trust in God is just talk and superstition until it generates new and faithful ways of relating and responding to other people. Forgiveness received from God dies unless it moves us to forgive each other.

Christmas is just a holiday, joyous or sorrowful, pleasant or burdensome, until we see and sense what God did by coming to us in such remarkable vulnerability. Despite later Christian attempts to turn him into a divine Superman never really like us at all, Jesus was quite normally human, which was exactly the point of what came to be called the Incarnation. John says, “And the Word became flesh and spread his tent among us.” *Became flesh* and

lived as we live, under our conditions and with our limitations, in a tent just like ours. The Christmas carol that sings, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,” gets it wrong with a notion that comes from a later time. Jesus’ humanity is not a veil but a fact, and that fact is the message as well as the manner in which the message is revealed. Love is inseparable from the person who loves, and God is revealed in the flesh, not behind it as though it were just a veil.

Jesus makes his followers vulnerable to others just as God made him vulnerable to us. Only by giving up the advantage, did God come to us in a way that could make peace. Only by living in our village, sharing our food, learning our dances and our jokes, and sharing the sorrow of our losses could God bridge the gap. Wednesday evening at the Language Exchange (Spanish and English), we shared proverbs from our native cultures. The differences in imagery and likenesses in meaning were fascinating, sharing common human experiences and insights from quite different settings. I felt a tiny breakthrough of understanding and what we call empathy – a harmony among us. Empathy is the skill as well as the experience needed for making peace. Empathy is the meaning of the Incarnation of the Word of God and the reason Jesus has his disciples leave behind any advantage they might have taken with them to be self-reliant in the midst of the villages they were to visit.

The word “empathy” once had the meaning of actually projecting one’s own personality into an object, especially a work of art, in order to understand it. The word for harmonizing with another person’s feelings was “sympathy,” but sympathy came to smack of pity which often implies condescension – a sort of benevolent disdain. These days, the word “empathy” is used to represent the process of getting in tune with another emotionally, of understanding in a sympathetic way but not with the sense of superiority we associate with pity. We cannot live another person’s story or another group’s shared experience, but we can enter the village without taking our advantages with us to protect us against needing to share life and accept hospitality, risking (of course) rejection.

Jesus humanizes God for us, but his purpose is achieved only as we let him go further and humanize us to each other. Whenever we fight wars, we first dehumanize the enemy; otherwise the warfare would not happen. Empathy is the enemy of war and the skill needed for making peace. “I can read you like a book” is a foolish presumption and an insulting invasion of privacy. But assuming we can’t know others outside our village and so need respond only to their uses and functions that benefit us is the source of all exploitation and estrangement. We other-ize those we want to use (or abuse) without understanding, without sharing sorrows or joys, without harmonizing in life. Jesus is God’s living empathy with us. In him, we can understand each other – we and God, then we and others. Belligerence does not “put Christ back into Christmas,” restoring the cultural advantage to Christianity. Jesus tells us to drop the advantage and put ourselves into the other’s village so we can keep putting him back into the world. Amen.