

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 59:1-3,7-15 and Luke 1:67-79

A PRAYER FOR PEACE

When we pray for something, we thereby commit ourselves to wanting the thing for which we have asked God. If we don't really want it, then our prayers stay right here in the sanctuary; we don't take them with us when we depart, and they don't take us anywhere in life. If we do want what we pray for, if we truly desire it, then we will seek it in life. If we are being honest with God and with ourselves, what we pray for in this place, we must seek and search out in the other places of our daily lives, which means prayer can require changes in us. Altering my desires, wanting something I have not truly wanted very strongly before, even though I may have acknowledged it as a good thing to have, will break my routine, start changing my habits, and in time alter the way I think and even the way I feel about myself and my life – about what truly matters and what might be taking much of my time without justification or benefit.

Jesus' disciples reach the point in their learning where he tells them that he will no longer refer to them as his servants but will call them his friends, because they know his mind. Their desires and expectations in life have been changed. They neither pray for nor seek the things they wanted before. No longer do they need to be told what they should care about, because they do care about the right things now. They no longer desire things that are worthless or trivial to God. Jesus has changed their hopes and dreams.

This morning we lit another candle for peace, as we light one every year during this Advent season of hope. What we have done is a sort of physical prayer, but so far it is only the symbolic sort which represents actions we would like to take as true physical prayers. For example, if I start praying for someone who has a grudge against me, that's a real step toward changing my attitude and expressing a desire for at least that person's well-being and maybe even for reconciliation, if indeed restoring the relationship is possible and desirable for both of us. Sometimes it is not, and the best I can do is pray for that person's well-being apart from me. But if there was once a friendship that was strained or broken but might possibly be healed with some softening of the heart on both sides, then I will find myself praying for an opening through which to make contact. That's another step in seeking what I pray for – a real physical prayer – but I need to be careful that what I seek really is reconciliation and not just the pious self-satisfaction of being able to say, "Well, at least I tried to restore the friendship," when in fact the way I approached the person was guaranteed

to fail because it lacked the humility needed to show my ex-friend that my position had softened. Humility is a strength that has nothing to do with groveling. Sadly, our winner-loser view of life and our right-or-wrong notion of truth prevent us from seeing the strength in honest humility.

So, we have made a symbolic prayer for peace, and in this service we have heard a psalmist, a prophet, and a gospel writer say that God calls us to seek peace and pursue it – an interesting pair of images because peace is, indeed, something that seems to run away when approach it, like the rabbit that lives in the bushes in front of Bonham Hall. Peace is tough to catch. It's inconvenient to make peace because making it requires us to soften our positions, respect the other person or group we have considered wrong, forgive the other and ourselves, and make concessions. I cannot make peace and have things one hundred percent my way. I have to empathize, which means I need to let myself feel along with the other person or group. I need to seek ways to understand life a little more from the other's perspective. Now, true enough, I cannot get inside someone else's mind and emotions; neither can I live someone else's experiences his or her way. Our ability to empathize is limited, as it should be, lest we overstep and violate each other's integrity and privacy. When someone says too easily, "I know how you feel," is your first reaction not to think, "No, you don't know how I feel!"? But God has given us the ability to resonate with the feelings of other people. Herein lies the power of good story telling and the true reason we have included in our visioning directions as a church the goal of "getting to know each other better." I can't read your mind any more than I can live your life, make your decisions, claim your successes, or feel your failures as you do. That's why Jesus warns us not to judge each other. But I can listen respectfully, seek understanding, and to some degree resonate with your story and your emotions if we both allow it. That's how love, friendship, and being a church together can become more than just each seeking his or her own benefit from the arrangement.

I wish I could find the quote again, but I've lost it. Several years ago in the seemingly endless back and forth of hostilities between the Israelis and the Palestinians, a rabbi was asked in an interview when peace would finally be made between the two groups. Instead of laying out a plan, he answered that peace would be made when each side began to feel the other's pain and not just its own.

A couple Sundays ago, I shared my theory of happiness. I have come to understand happiness as something that cannot be achieved directly, that cannot be caught by pursuit, and that surely cannot be secured by acquiring possessions or power. I think happiness is something we derive from thankfulness. I think further that happiness is something we gain by giving others reason to be thankful, but even that insight is not complete. What I'm trying to explain is difficult for the Western mind to process because we are not trained to think this

way. From the Bible's perspective, there is no "me" apart from God, other people, and the human community as a whole. Life is relational, a back-and-forth kind of thing that really cannot be isolated from the interaction of relationships. So, I can't take happiness for myself, but neither can I just give it to you. There is a sharing in thankfulness that's hard to explain, but it's real.

This much the Bible makes very clear: if my gratitude to God comes at your expense, God will reject my thanksgiving. God does not want thank offerings from what I have taken from you by theft or just selfishness in our falsely glorified competition for scarce resources in this world. We have been taught to think that winning means taking the best before somebody else can grab it. But life is relational, and if my thankfulness to God leaves you out in the cold, God will not accept my thanks.

Now, what does this digression about seeking happiness have to do with seeking peace? Just as happiness cannot be isolated as a thing by itself, neither can peace. The Farmworkers Support Committee has a saying which declares a same truth we find also in the Bible. It says, "Sin la justicia, no habrá la paz," which translates as, "Without justice, there will be no peace" The prophet laments of his people and their self-destructive choices:

The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice in their paths.

Those two accusations are set in parallel: "There is no justice in their paths" helps explain what "The way of peace they do not know," means. Why do they not know the way of peace? It's because they do not care to see justice done for the disadvantaged and vulnerable. The way to make real peace is to seek and find ways and means for removing injustices. Otherwise, what we mislabel as "peace" will always be nothing better than the imposition of the will of the stronger upon the weaker and the silencing of protest.

We lit a candle for peace. Again this year. That's a symbolic physical prayer that we can take with us when we go or choose to leave right here in the sanctuary with the extinguished candle. That choice God grants us, but I think we will find that if we try to gain inner peace for ourselves without acknowledging the relational nature of human life, we will learn to our sorrow that our private peace can feel an awful lot like loneliness. God created us, not for the false and brittle strength of self-sufficiency, but for the true strength and wholeness of life shared within the context of God's love for all. That shared wholeness in which all participate and none is left out is the Bible's kind of peace: *shalom*. Jesus gave himself so we may have that wholeness with God and each other in the human community. He came to make that kind of peace. Amen.