

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for World Communion, October 5, 2008
Lessons: Deuteronomy 24:5,6,10-22 and Ephesians 2:11-22

PRACTICAL PEACEMAKING

Meeting in Detroit in 1980, our Presbyterian General Assembly adopted a paper titled, “Peacemaking, the Believer’s Calling,” and established the annual Peacemaking Offering we will dedicate this morning. Seven years later, the General Assembly approved a study paper called, “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews.”¹ That paper made seven theological affirmations, every one of which required follow-through: study, conversation, and then action.²

This summer, in conversation with a friend and teacher, I referred to one of those seven affirmations, which declares “a determination to put an end to ‘the teaching of contempt’ for the Jews.” My friend replied that the statement was fine but that what is needed is for Christians to get specific – to point the finger and say, “This is contempt, this is contempt, and this also is contempt.” To make changes that matter, and certainly to heal damaged relationships, we need to get specific about where and how the damage has been done. Otherwise, we mouth high principles, but no healing follows.

The Bible’s book of Deuteronomy gets specific about what should not be done to a vulnerable person, one who is poor or a foreigner living and working among God’s people. For example, if your neighbor has to ask to borrow money, he will give you a pledge (what we call collateral) which may be only an article of clothing, since all these people were poor by our standards. What you must not do is enter your neighbor’s house as though you were seizing his property. No, you wait respectfully outside his door for him to bring the pledge to you. And if he is quite poor and gives you only a piece of outer clothing such as a cloak, you must understand that the pledge is symbolic of his promise to repay you and return it to him before nightfall so he will have it for warmth when he sleeps. The general principle is clear: when your neighbor is at a disadvantage, do not exploit his condition to humiliate him. But the specifics put the principle into effect in the relations between neighbors.

Likewise, Deuteronomy commands:

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are

poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

Here again, the specifics give force to the general principle also stated, “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice.” But justice is a lofty concept brought down to earth by the specific command, frequently broken these days in our society: *do not withhold the immigrant’s wages.*

What are the general principles for Christians about peacemaking? We believe:

- All humanity and, therefore, every human being is created in the image of God.
- Jesus Christ, God’s Son, gave himself because God loves the world and all its people. In his passion (his crucifixion and all that led up to it), he entered into solidarity with all people who are sinful, who are humiliated, who are outcast, who are made to suffer by life or by society or by their neighbors. So, the way we treat the person at a disadvantage is the way we are treating Jesus Christ.
- In our reading from the Letter to the Ephesians and elsewhere in the Newer Testament, we hear that Christ came to reconcile divided people and hostile groups, bringing us together before God. “So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”
- Because all people are created by God and called to redemption by Christ to live as God’s daughters and sons, our divisions and hostilities perpetuate and reincarnate in God’s children the breaking of Jesus’ body and the shedding of his blood.

Now, what can we do to make Christ’s call to peacemaking practical and specific? I have some suggestions.

- Identify the stereotypes we have been taught to lump people together unfairly. Once I see the stereotype for what it is, I can catch myself using it and stop. I can even learn to make fun of myself a little, reinforcing my intention and prayers to stop judging people falsely and get to know them as persons.
- Identify resentments. Stop defending ourselves and listen to the other’s anger or hurt. Yes, this step is hard, especially if we have resentments or fears of our own, and even more especially if our pride depends upon seeing ourselves as superior to the other group. But at the Lord’s Table, all superiority is dropped and discarded.
- Sensitize ourselves to the triggers. If we do not know the history of alienation and of the damage done, we may not know the sore points. Then, we find ourselves thinking, defensively, “I didn’t mean any harm; what’s she so touchy about, what’s his problem?”

- From the other side, try to stop the “gotcha!” business that pounces on words or phrases. But we need to keep in mind that the group which has been put down can stop the “gotchas” only when the group that has the advantage becomes deliberately aware of the history and the triggers to shame and resentment and stops repeating them. Both sides have to work at peacemaking, but the burden of history falls upon the one that had the advantage. The burden of faith falls upon the one who knows God’s love for people.
- Listen actively, even if we start out disagreeing. But to listen, we have to first come together and establish some minimal comfort level that allows people to open up, however tentatively. We have to see some level of respect in each other’s eyes.
- Learn a little of the other’s language, and I don’t necessarily mean a literal foreign language such as Spanish but a world of speech that expresses a life that may be foreign (unknown) to us. Do I understand the jokes and ironies? Can I “get” a little of the insider talk? The more we show understanding of each other, the more peacemaking progresses.
- Suspend judgment. As long as I see myself as the one authorized to approve or disapprove of other people, I will not be a peacemaker. At the Lord’s Table, we are all on the same level. Peacemaking requires humility with strength, not shame, but humility it must be.
- And stop the practice of making exceptions of particular individuals, exceptions that allow us to maintain the stereotypes. “Oh, he’s not like the rest of *them*.” That kind of thing which falsely embraces one person while still scorning the “type” is cheating, and we need to reverse it by letting the individual break the stereotype itself so we can toss it into our mental trash cans.

It is not my intention to make an exhaustive list of ways to get practical and specific about making peace in our personal relations and in our communities. It is my intention to help us remind ourselves that Jesus Christ calls us to be peacemakers. And it is my intention to learn from my friend’s wisdom that healing old wounds and making peace requires us to get specific. Amen.

1. See <http://www.pcusa.org/interfaith/study/christiansjews.htm> which summarizes and includes a link to the complete study paper.
2. For a recent development, see the article in the Jewish United Fund newsletter, “Jewish Groups Welcome Presbyterian Statement on Vigilance Against Anti-Jewish Ideas and Bias.” The article may be found at <http://www.juf.org/news/local.aspx?id=32922> .