

"Bringing Back the Peace Pipe"

Psalm 85:8-13; I John 2:7-11, 15-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 14, 2014 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

A woman found herself seated behind two men on a bus before the days of air conditioning. After a while one of the men complained about the heat and started to open the window. The other man stopped him, saying that he would die of pneumonia if the window didn't stay closed. The more they debated the merits of open window versus closed window, the more intense the discussion became.

Finally, as they were about to come to blows, the driver stopped the bus to settle the dispute. But even he had little success in calming the men down. By this time the woman sitting behind was fed up with the argument and offered her solution. "First, open the window," she said. "That will kill one man. Then close it, and that will polish off the other. Then maybe we can all have some peace around here!"

Somebody once said that they love humanity; it's just people that they can't stand. Well, certain individuals we come into contact with are hard to take. We can understand the frustration of the woman on the bus and can see why wanting to get rid of both of them would be a tempting solution. One belligerent person is bad enough, but two could be more than we can take. So, a plague on both of them. Maybe they ought to fight it out. Then, whatever happens, at least the arguing and fighting will be over.

That's also a tempting strategy to restore peace in our world as a whole. We get so tired of hearing about the atrocities committed by the militant groups in the Middle East, in the Sudan, and Ukraine that we're apt to throw up our hands and say, "Just let them fight it out. There's no good guys and bad guys in this situation. Everybody's at fault. No one wants to compromise. Let's not get involved. Let them kill each other, then we'll deal with whoever is left."

It's not too disturbing to think of tanks blowing each other up or shells falling on some military storage building. It isn't nearly so easy, however, when we see the picture of an old person slowly starving to death because supplies can't get through. It's much harder to forget reality when we see the face of a child who has been disfigured by shrapnel. Should we avert our eyes because we're tired of the bickering, because we're tired of the intransigence of the combatants, because we are not directly affected by this conflict, then we also turn our backs on pushing the case for peace in a time that so desperately needs it.

Peace is truly the dominant theme of both Judaism and Christianity. Our psalm reading for today, Psalm 85, is one of the many expressions of peace and a most beautiful one. This psalm in its entirety was used in the worship liturgy and is constructed as a dialogue between God and God's people.

It begins with a solo voice praising God for mercy in forgiving Israel's sin. The congregation then responds with verses that ask God for a new expression of love for creation, ending with this plea: "Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation."

Then we pick up the liturgy with today's scripture section: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land."

This is spoken by the priest, who symbolically listens for God's response that it might be conveyed to the people. It anticipates God's favorable word, and that expectation is borne out in the reply: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will embrace. Humanity's loyalty will reach up from the earth, and God's righteousness will look down from heaven." The psalm then concludes with words of thankfulness from the people for God's promise.

How does this ancient song extolling God's love and desire for peace on earth square with our world of today? Well, it's true enough that none of us here are directly impacted by war. Bombs don't fall outside our windows. We don't need to fear rockets on our way home. It isn't necessary to watch out for militants who might come around the corner at any moment. But does this mean that the whole world is filled with peace?

Perhaps the view out our window simply reflects the fortunate accident of residence. We could be in Nigeria or Libya or Afghanistan or Yemen. It's only by birth or immigration here that we aren't living in daily fear.

Currently we have reason for hope in one conflict area now that Israel and Palestine have agreed to a cease-fire. Still, we're reminded of the words of President Carter who mediated the treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1978 and quoted from the philosopher Spinoza: "Peace is not an absence of war; it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence [and] justice."

True peace, we can agree, is not merely active conflict but is positive action toward harmony. It is people living together in trust and security. True peace is the highest realization of the brotherhood of all and is something that must be lived out in tangible form.

Thankfully, the fear of direct warfare on our soil is not a part of our everyday worries in America; yet, as the anniversary of 9/11 reminds us, we are not immune to terrorism at any time or in any place. And it's also true that many of us don't feel totally safe in our streets, or even in our own homes today, because of crime. So that's not peace either. Until enough people are ready to speak the words of peace, and live the words of peace, we will never know peace in its Biblical intention.

I grew up in a small town during the 1950's. While I knew about the conflict in Korea it really didn't affect me. My dad was home every night and none of our immediate neighbors had anyone in the service. I can also remember those games we played as children and the imaginary characters we became. With an old piece of cloth for a cape you could be Superman. A cap gun and a hat would make you Roy Rogers or Annie Oakley. And, of course, a bow and colorful feather turned you into an Indian.

I don't suppose we ever gave much thought to ethnic stereotyping when we played cowboys and Indians in those days. After all we grew up with Amos and Andy played by two white guys on the radio, so what would you expect? The only Native Americans we knew were what Hollywood put on the screen. Yet even here the true character and dignity of a people still managed to get through the screen writing of the time.

We enjoyed our skirmishes between the "cowboys" and the "Indians," but we also looked forward to ending our play with the smoking of a peace pipe. That always let us part for the day on a positive note. As I remember we had an old pipe that once belonged to Gary's father. We used imaginary tobacco, although we once packed it with dry grass, lit it, and made ourselves sick. As we used that ritual to heal the differences between the combatants, it also seemed to bring us closer as playmates.

Maybe there ought to be a law requiring Americans to keep a peace pipe in all our neighborhoods, and in all our families, maybe even in all our churches. Then whenever problems arise we can simply sit down and reaffirm peace and friendship through through a symbolic act. Far-fetched?

Or we could work for justice. We could press for equity between people. We could promote ways for different folks to get to know each other better. We could teach acceptance and respect to our children. We could support cross-cultural exchanges. We could refuse to tolerate bigotry and name calling. We could get to know the real person inside the national or racial or gender differences we wear on our skins. We could learn negotiation rather than confrontation. There's a lot of positive work we can do.

In the letter of John the writer reminds us: "Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such persons there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go... Those who do the will of God live forever.

Consider this: peace will not come by default, but will only be realized when each one of us makes an active and personal commitment to it. Peace is to share God's vision of brotherhood on earth and then help to bring it about.