



A sermon by E. Scott Winnette
February 2, 2020
Planting Peace – Matthew 5:1-12

Civil rights activist, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin prayed: *"Because we love the world, we pray now, O [God], for grace to quarrel with it, O Thou whose lover's quarrel with the world is the history of the world . . . , grant us grace to quarrel with the worship of success and power to quarrel with all that profanes and trivializes [people] and separates them ... number us, we beseech Thee, in the ranks of those who went forth from this place longing only for those things for which Thou dost make us long, [those] for whom the complexity of the issues only served to renew their zeal to deal with them, [those] who alleviated pain by sharing it; and [those] who were always willing to risk something big for something good . . . O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire."*¹

Jesus enflamed the disciple's hearts in his Sermon on the Mount beginning with the Beatitudes. These beautiful phrases convey God's approval, God's favor towards those addressed. "Blessed are those..." "Favored are those...". Know you are favored you who are **"starved and burnt out seeking justice and a foundation for peace, for 'you' shall be surrounded by all that is needed to achieve it and be satisfied."**

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says we should let the Beatitudes "stand us on our head." She preached: "The world looks funny upside down, but maybe that is just how it looks when you have got your feet planted in heaven. Jesus did it all the time and seemed to think we could too. So blessed are those who stand on their heads, for

¹ *Christian Century* 1-25-2005

they shall see the world as God sees it. They shall also find themselves in good company, turned upside down by the only one who knows which way is up.”

Considering these American days, let us center ourselves on the beatitude of peace. Jesus said, **“Blessed are those who plant peace for they shall be known as the ones who fulfill the work and purpose of God.”** The term for peace is in the New Testament 100 times. Jesus enflames our hearts into fiery peacemaking. But peace is not easy. Peacemaking throughout scripture is proactive, requiring methods, patience, work, even several steps – initiative, planning and ongoing commitment.

Last week I cogitated about leaving my echo chamber and reaching out to my cousins, reaching out to my high school friends, reaching out to the other-minded and talking, seeking understanding, seeking peace. Pondering the ways, we grow peace, the Sabbatical comes to mind. Prepare the ground – dig, cull out the stones, break up the clods. Maybe that’s finding the best way to communication, is it a call, a visit. Then select the healthiest most potent seed. Maybe, that’s finding something to first talk about that is common ground, a memory of something enriching. Find the old family photos, find the yearbook. Plant the seed stepping out in faith - investing in the future. Then cultivate – water, fertilize and protect the seedling from predators. Keep in contact, persevere. Of course, we must weed plucking out distractions, plucking out old quarrels and knee-jerk reactions. Blessed be, eventually there is a harvest time. We grow peace by establishing right relationships.

American ethicist and theologian Glen Stassen gathered 24 ecumenical scholars and charged them to think about “Just Peace” as a concept in conversation with the concept of “Just War.” They collaborated for six years. The fruit of their labor is the book “Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War.” Basing their work in the beatitudes they suggest several steps to grow peace.²

The first step in peacemaking is not to change the enemy but to change one’s self. Nurturing and nourish the peacemaker rather than jumping right into a set of actions. It’s necessary to transform oneself before it is possible to take a serious, prayerful look at the other. Situation self in health then get to farming peace.

Second - go, talk, and welcome one another. Humanize the other. See the image of God in them. Seek to be reconciled. Studies of war show that before nations make war, they almost always dehumanize the other group, calling them animals justifying their alienation and then elimination. President Reagan called Khadafy a “mad dog” before bombing Libya. George H. Bush declared Saddam Hussein “worse than Hitler” and called the Ayatollah Khomeini the “Great Satan.” George W. Bush used the language, “Axis of Evil” before the Iraq War. Stop the bad-mouthing, and the character assassinations and go to them, talk to them and seek to make peace with them. Pray for right relationship.

Third – forget revenge and make transforming gestures. Peacemaking isn’t conflict free. While we are not to retaliate, we are to confront. We are not to roll over and play dead as if we don’t what justice looks like. Don’t just but engage in astonishingly visible

² Many thanks to Bonnie Holcomb for her distillation of Glen Stassen’s work in a sermon at the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church.

deeds that surprise and confront the enemies' hostility. Prayerfully, raise the possibility of a heartwarming breakthrough of peace.

Fourth - invest in delivering justice. Don't just try to make the relationship right when you are the one who is oppressed. Seek justice even when you appear to have the advantage, try to find a relationship of equality on which to build. In Elie Wiesel's 1986 Nobel Lecture he said, "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

Fifth - Love your enemies with actions; affirm their valid interests. Live centered in the heart flames of agape love. Plant seeds that enable you to find value in them or in the things they love. Boldly cross the gap; find a way to change the situation – in other words, to make peace.

Sixth - pray for your enemies and bless them; persevere in prayer. Take up the challenge of transforming the situation.

Seventh - don't judge, but repent and forgive. Regard as potential partners those who set themselves up as your adversary and get going, move into peace.

Lastly - do peacemaking with others, as a group of disciples. If we are to be peacemakers and justice makers, we must do it together.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Just to be is a blessing, to live is holy." We are a blessed people. Plant peace and we be known as the ones who fulfill the work and purpose of God. May it be so. Amen.