The Gift of Peace

Philippians 4:4-9; Ephesians 2:11-22

Matthew 5:9  Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Note carefully that Jesus said ‘peacemakers.’ Not peace lovers; not peacekeepers; not pacifists. Peacemakers—all the others present drawbacks.

A peace lover can be driven by a desire for peace at any price. Remember Neville Chamberlain’s comment about the Munich Agreement in 1938: “I believe it is peace in our time.” Too much peace loving, not enough discernment or worldly wisdom.

A peace-keeper can be in a dangerous position, literally caught in the cross-fire, and the results of their efforts can be limited. They keep enemies apart for a time, but they may only postpone the conflict. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan says it is simply biding its time.

There have been courageous and heroic pacifists in many countries. The problem is, however, that the evil in the world means that someone has to fight it. Remember Bonhoeffer’s anguished abandoning of his pacifism to resist Hitler.

All these strategies have their advocates, but they are inadequate to deal with the turmoil that is the human scene, and the propensity for violence that is the human heart.

Now, if anyone knows the human heart, it is Jesus. That’s what makes this Beatitude so important: blessed are the peacemakers. But when we look at Jesus, what we see look like surprising contradictions on the topic of peace.

He came on the wings of a promise of peace. Isaiah said, “His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” That promise found an echo at Bethlehem, “Glory to God in highest heaven and on earth, peace among those whom God favors.”

Jesus’ actions implied the possibility of peace between nations. He rejected violence towards the Romans; he healed a Roman soldier’s servant. He was welcoming to Greeks, open to Samaritans. When some Samaritans rejected him and two disciples wanted revenge, he rebuked them.

But there were lots of other times when we don’t.

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1 Matthew 5:41.
2 Matthew 8:5ff.
3 John 12:20.
4 John 4
His teaching was at times provocative: for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan will have divided his hearers as sharply as any political division in our day. On one occasion, he refused to resolve a family dispute. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me,” he was asked. “Friend,” he replied, “who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

The pattern of his ministry was often confrontational—his table fellowship with sinners and his Sabbath healings offended current religious practices.

Frederick Buechner catches this complexity in Jesus well. He points out that Jesus said both, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword” (Matt.10:34) and “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” (Jn.14:27) Is this a contradiction? Buechner comments,

The contradiction is resolved when you realize that for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle but the presence of love.

Jesus’ struggle was to bring the presence of love to defeat the sin that disfigures and diminishes us.

- You regard people as your enemies, and forget God loves them, too.
- You look down on the marginalized and sinful, and overlook the sin of self-righteousness you’ve just committed.
- You fight your brother over the inheritance but forget the legacy of greed that makes possessions more important than people.

The presence of love in Jesus was shown supremely on the cross. As the Letter to the Ephesians shows, the cross is Jesus sacrificing himself to take away the sin of the world, one crucial outcome of which is to make God’s peacemaking, reconciling love available to everyone, thus breaking down barriers and removing the hostility that creates a divided world.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made [us] one... he has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us, verse 14 proclaims.

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,” Paul proclaims in 2 Corinthians, “not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

Peacemakers are children of God, Jesus proclaims: they share the nature of their Father, they carry on their Father’s business in the world, they are called to be peacemakers. Peacemaking is the work of God who is called ‘the God of peace’ six times in the New Testament.

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8 2 Corinthians 5:19.
How can it be done? Patiently, gently, one relationship at a time. Last week, I read of a wonderful example of peacemaking at work.

Rick Love is on his fourth career: he has been a pastor, a missionary, a missionary director and, for the past eight years, a peacemaker.

He is the president and co-founder of Peace Catalyst International, an organization that focuses on reconciliation between Christians and Muslims.

He does what he calls “social peacemaking,” which breaks down barriers of prejudice, stereotypes and fears, primarily by building relationships between Christians and Muslims.

One important aspect of his approach is getting people to sit down together for a conversation or a meal. “I tell people the key to peacemaking is drinking lots of coffee and tea,” he said.

When we had people from the [local] mosque come to visit [our church, our pastor] was from Texas, so he was really into barbecue. Well, he bought a half-side of halal beef and he barbecued it eight hours...

I was laughing and saying, “They’re not going to eat this.” But they went back for seconds! They loved the barbecue, and the fact that this was halal and he went to that effort won them over.

I had a good relationship with the president of the mosque and the imam there, and just recently, a former Marine and a bunch of bikers came to the mosque to intimidate. They wore graphic, gross shirts, and they brought firearms. This was high-powered.

Well, a group from Peace Catalyst [heard about the planned demonstration and] they got about 150 Christians to the mosque prior to the coming of the bikers. Their goal was just to build a wall of prayer and peace so there would be no violence. It was an amazing story.

Because of all the relationships and all the people working together, it was peaceful. In fact, there were a number of the bikers that took their shirts off and turned them inside out, because they were embarrassed once they met Muslims that were reaching out very warmly.⁹

Inviting people to sit down for coffee or a meal is a good strategy. Last night at Film and Faith, we saw the same hospitality tactic at work. Seeking to reconcile black and white South Africa, Nelson Mandela saw potential in the national rugby team as the agent of reconciliation, despite its support from the Afrikaner community. There were mountainous suspicions and prejudices to overcome—on both sides. So he invited the captain of the rugby team—for a cup of tea! The work of reconciliation had begun.

And this reflects a strategy of Jesus. Read the gospels, especially Luke:

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them,” his critics sniffed. (Luke 15:1) The ministry of peacemaking.

“On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath ...,“ (Luke 14:1) The ministry of peacemaking.

“One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him and he went into the Pharisee’s house ...” (Luke 7:36) The ministry of peacemaking.

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5) The ministry of peacemaking.

Now, you may not have opportunity to do peacemaking between Christians and Muslims, or across racial divides (although don’t be too sure about that! Keep your eyes peeled and your mind open.) But the same dynamic applies to any estrangement or divisiveness.

The ministry of reconciliation, the work of peacemaking, begins when we sit down with someone we’re estranged from and get to know them. Know them first as a person God loves and therefore—whatever they’ve done—as a sister or brother, a neighbor we are called to love.

I had never noticed before, how relevant the fruits of the Spirit are to this, as Paul outlines them in Galatians 5.

Love comes first: God’s love poured into our hearts making us loving; then joy fills us up, then peace comes next: peace with God inspiring us towards peace with others. Then all the other fruits are gifts we need to be peacemakers:

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

A fractured society, a divided nation, a hurting world cry out for peacemakers. And we Christians should be among the first responders.

Blessed are the pacemakers, for they will be called children of God.