

You Can Be a Person of Peace

Message for Sunday, December 4, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6; Matthew 5:43-45 and more

Children's Message:

Romans 12:18, Good News Bible:
Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody.

Today we lit the second candle in the Advent wreath. Do you remember what this candle is a symbol of? *Listen for answers.* Right; it's the candle of peace.

Jesus talked a lot about peace. He talked about forgiving people who have hurt us. He talked about loving our enemies. I'd like to tell you a story that helps us understand how to live as people of peace.

Stephen Covey wrote this book, and in it he tells about one morning he was on the subway train in New York City.

People were sitting quietly some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's newspapers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?"

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either." ¹

That simple statement changed everything. Where before Stephen had felt irritation, he suddenly felt compassion and sympathy. Where before he wished this "problem" would go away and leave him alone, he now wanted to help in whatever way he could.

QUESTION: What made the difference in how Stephen felt about the other man? *Listen for answers.* You're right: he understood how the other person felt.

When you are having a problem with someone, one of the best ways to deal with this is to try to understand that person. That doesn't mean you'll become friends. But it's a first step towards peace.

Message: "You can be a person of peace"

1) God's promise of peace

One of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, the Saviour, gives to that person the title "Prince of Peace":

Isaiah 9:6, New International Version:
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This promise of peace in the Bible is good news in our world. It's welcome news. It's badly needed news.

Jesus is that Prince of Peace. Into a world full of oppression, conflict and war, Jesus came to bring peace:

Matthew 5:43-45, New Living Translation:
[Jesus said,] "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But

¹ Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 30.

I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.”

Most of the cards and songs and commercials we are exposed to at Christmastime are happy messages of joy and peace. It can be easy for us to forget that the first Christmas was anything but peaceful. Some time after Mary gave birth to Jesus, the family had to flee to Egypt, because Herod’s soldiers were on a killing rampage, murdering all the baby boys they could find; Jesus was their target. And Jesus himself, although he lived peace and taught peace, was taken by force, tortured, and finally cruelly killed on a cross. The cross and Christmas go together.

2) Christians are people of peace

It just occurred to me, as I was writing this, that it’s rather astonishing, that a movement which was born under conditions of such violence, should be a movement with peace as one of its main themes. For example, when Jesus and his disciples were travelling around the country and the people of one village snubbed their group, James and John wanted vengeance on them:

Luke 9:54, Today’s English Version:
“Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

At the end, when the police and soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter responded to violence with more violence:

John 18:10, Today’s English Version:
Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the High Priest’s slave, cutting off his right ear.

That’s the kind of people the disciples were, *even after Jesus had been showing them his way of life for three years!*

Here’s something I discovered: I looked up all the passages in the New Testament which have the word “peace.” To my amazement, I found that most of the letters in the New Testament begin with a greeting of peace: *all* of Paul’s letters; the same with Peter’s letters; one of John’s letters begins with peace, and another ends with peace; the letter of Jude; and the book of Revelation. Here are a few of them:

1 Corinthians 1:3, New Century Version:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:2, New International Version:
Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

Revelation 1:4, Today’s English Version:
From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace be yours from God, who is, who was, and who is to come.

If this happened in just a couple of places, I would think nothing of it. But when I saw it *every single time*, and not buried halfway through the letter, but *right at the very beginning*, it really hit me (oops, I guess I shouldn’t use violent language like that!).

When the Bible talks about peace, there are two different kinds of peace.

a) Peace with God

Romans 5:1-2, New Century Version:
Since we have been made right with God by our faith, we have peace with God. This happened through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought us into that blessing of God’s grace that we now enjoy.

Knowing God and God’s love, knowing that my sins are forgiven, knowing that there is hope, knowing that I am not alone – all these give a deep peace in the heart of a believer.

b) Live in peace with others

Romans 12:17-19, New Living Translation:
Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honourable. Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.

Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written,
“I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it,” says the Lord.

This is not an option. Jesus commanded it (the passage I mentioned near the beginning, about “Love your enemies”). Our job is to live it. We can’t control what others do; but we are responsible to God for how we treat others.

3) Can the promise be fulfilled today?

Here's the big question: Is all this talk about peace valid in the year 2016, in the world you and I live in today?

More than 2,500 years ago, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah this promise of peace.

Isaiah 2:2-4, New International Version:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established

as chief among the mountains;

it will be raised above the hills,

and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He will judge between the nations

and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

That's a wonderful vision for our world. That's the world which God intends for us.

We might think, "Well, what can I do?" The truth is, our lives can make a difference for peace. When you see someone being discriminated against because of their colour or religion or anything, you can stand up for them. Physically stand beside them. If they're not present, speak up, "I won't listen to that kind of talk," or "That's not a joke; that's not funny at all."

Tony Campolo tells a story from World War II which is an example of this.

The police in Bulgaria had rounded up the Jews in Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria. They herded them to the train station, where German SS troops held them under guard until the train arrived. The train was to take them away to the death camps in Germany. They had the Jews in a barbed wire enclosure.

It was a rainy, misty, night. They did this late at night because many people had protested the

persecution of the Jews. The Nazis didn't want any trouble.

Out of the darkness appeared Metropolitan Kyril, the leader of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria. He was a tall man to start with, well over six feet, but with his bishop's miter on his head, he must have appeared like a giant coming towards the guards out of the darkness. He was wearing his black robes and his long white beard hung over them. Marching behind him were about three hundred members of the church. His steps were so long that others had to run to keep up with him.

He went to the entrance of the barbed wire fence. The SS guards pointed their machine guns at him and said, "You can't go in there, Father." [What would you do in that situation?] He *laughed* at them, brushed their weapons aside, and marched in among the Jews. They gathered around him, eager to see what the leader of the Christians would say or do in their moment of distress, their moment of dire need. They were crying; some were hysterical. They knew they were headed for Auschwitz where they would be killed. They needed a miracle.

Something miraculous happened. Metropolitan Kyril quoted a verse of Scripture from the Bible, from the book of Ruth. With that one verse he changed the destiny of a nation. He said to them, "Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

The Jews cheered. The Christians outside the barbed wire fence, they cheered. The noise was so great, the townspeople started coming out of their homes, down to the train station to see what was happening. The hundreds grew to thousands. The SS troops knew there was no way they were going to get away with carting these Jews off to their death. The train arrived empty and left the same way, and never came back.

Six million Jews from around Europe died in the Nazi concentration camps. But not a single Jew from Bulgaria ever died in those horrible places. Because the Church of Jesus Christ boldly stood up and said, "We will identify with the oppressed, and we will suffer with them. This is the Jesus way."

That is the kind of thing that happens when someone believes—*truly believes*—with all their heart that Jesus really and truly is the Saviour, the Prince of Peace, and that his kingdom is a reality right here and now, not some time way off in the future.

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah had a vision from God, a vision where people would lay down their arms, where the Lord would be the source of their peace, where they would learn to work together.

What if it were to happen? What would happen if the nations of the world took the money spent on war, and used it – as in the vision of Isaiah – to make farm tools to grow food? Just think:

- if everyone in the world had plenty of food to eat;
- if farmland could actually be used to grow food, instead of being fenced off because of landmines;
- if people had clean water to drink;
- if parents everywhere could watch their children grow up healthy and strong;
- if schools and health clinics had all the supplies they needed;
- if the poor and homeless had warm places to call home...

– and all this could easily be done if the money now spent on the military was used instead for peace – if all this happened, imagine what the world would be like! There would be no reason for war!

That's the vision of God's plan for the world. Right now it's only a distant dream. And so we still need police and soldiers to protect the innocent from those who seek to abuse their power.

Still, we can do our part wherever we are to live as people of peace.

Next Steps:

- Make peace with God: Jesus came to show us the Father's love, and to give his life for us. Through Jesus, our sins are wiped clean, and we have a new life with God.
- Live in peace with others: Forgive those who have hurt you; ask forgiveness from those you have hurt; see the good in everyone, and seek the good for everyone.