

The Peacemakers

Essay 9 in the series “The Beatitudes”

“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.”

But before I emphatically proclaim this seventh beatitude as recorded in Matthew 5:9, I want to go back to the sixth, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God,” because this is, in my understanding, the crucial one. Yes, there is a rhyme and rhythm to these beatitudes, and they wisely begin with “the poor in spirit,” for little spiritual progress can be made except by the poor in spirit, but the one that, in the end, makes all the difference is the sixth: “Blessed are the pure in heart,” those who single-mindedly seek God, those who rise
above the self,
above the self,
above the self.

They are the ones who see God, who experience God, who encounter the presence of God. And only those who have seen God can fully realize poverty in spirit or meekness, only they find it natural, find it obvious, to be merciful, and only they find all the strength it takes to passionately pursue what is right or all the strength it takes to make peace. And strength it takes. And courage and creativity. It takes going where at first few will go with you. And it takes seeing possibilities that most others do not see; it takes almost always thinking outside the box. I’ve taken some bold stands in my life. I’m prepared to take more. But what if peace were centrally my message, an insistence on peace, a firm, unshakeable commitment to making peace? What price would I pay then?

Intrigued as I am by the glories of war, by reading of heroic campaigners from Roman times to ours, and as aware as I am of those times when weakness masquerades as peace as it did at Munich in 1938, I am still more aware of the awful cost of war, of the generations lost to war, of how preventable many wars were, of how ridiculous some were, and of how when nations in anger and outrage try to crush their enemies as France and England did to Germany at Versailles in 1919 they make more war all but inevitable. The sow the wind, and they reap the whirlwind.

So it is not surprising that Jesus came, born into a land under the foreign occupation of imperial Rome, a land that for hundreds of years had known few years of peace, a land ruled by the despotic king Herod “the Great,” and said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” He came into a world awash in blood, confronting an empire built on blood, declaring from the first that he came to bring peace, and that he expected his followers to be peacemakers. Jesus knew that in our blood-soaked world filled with hatred, greed, wounded pride, seething resentment, hostility and violence, there must be a group of people redeemed and transformed, skilled in the arts of trust and forgiveness, a new humanity, a worldwide network devoted to peace, who could resist the hair-trigger urge to get even, who could turn the other cheek, who when asked to do what is distasteful could go the second mile, who could love their enemies and pray for those who

persecuted them, who could in every way blow the expectations of others, who could keep astonishing people by their generosity of spirit and heart, who would work actively to make peace.

So why have we not yet experienced what Jesus came to inaugurate, and in fact what the great Hebrew prophets anticipated? Why are swords not being beat into plowshares – and spears in pruning hooks? Why are nations still training for war with expenditures that defy imagination? Simply put, because not nearly enough people have taken Jesus seriously. Because even we who go to church all the time, well, an hour a week, are far too often among those who are still seething, still resenting, still acting and speaking in hateful ways. Because even we who claim to be followers of Jesus are far too often listening to voices that say what is diametrically the opposite of Jesus.

We all know that this is not easy. There is out in the western hills of Jerusalem a Holocaust memorial called Yad Vashem. It pays stark simple tribute to the six million Jews who died in the Nazi holocaust before the watching eyes of a “Christian” world. In its museum are the pictures. Pictures of the silent, naked dying, defiled and dehumanized. Pictures of burning synagogues. Pictures of pits filled with corpses. Pictures of the walking dead trapped in ghettos. And there are the stories – told in the words of those who survived and those that didn’t. On the floor of the windowless Tent of Remembrance, lit by an eternal flame, are inlaid the names of the death camps: Sobibor ... Chelmno ... Treblinka ... Dachau ... Theresienstadt ... Birkenau ... Auschwitz ... and more. I never forget the last time I saw Yad Vashem. That same afternoon those I was traveling with drove out to Bethlehem, and out in what are called the Shepherds’ Fields, we read Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. And the awful truth hit home that what happened at Bethlehem over 2000 years ago happened so that there would be no more Yad Vashems, no more need for such memorials, no more holocausts, no more massacres. And as I stood looking out over the fields of Bethlehem, I wondered: Why was Jesus not heard? Not followed? Not taken seriously? What has gone wrong? It was all so simple. Why was he not heard? Whatever happened to “Blessed are the peacemakers”? Whatever happened to, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword”? Why have we not invested in peace, invested our time, talent and money in peace, invested our ingenuity and creativity in peace, as much as we have in war? Why should we expect the cost of peace to be any less than the cost of war? What would happen if we were to “wage peace” with the discipline, training, forethought, preparation, mobilization, sacrifice, and willingness to suffer that so many have accepted to wage war?

We’re not talking here of pacifism; we’re talking about peacemaking. Pacifists are mostly known for what they won’t do; peacemakers distinguish themselves by what they will do: the imagination it takes to find nonviolent solutions to conflict, the discipline it takes to listen to and sort out the perceived grievances of your adversary, the integrity it takes to admit your own part in the conflict, the hard work it takes to care about your enemy’s security and well-being as well as your own, the willingness to suffer casualties just as soldiers do.

But if we could do it! Imagine. There was a time when no one could imagine life without slavery. Not really so very long ago. Imagine a world without war. Is it really so unthinkable, or is it largely a lack of imagination and discipline?

Such a future depends on the way of Jesus, the way of the Cross. There must be on earth a new people redeemed and transformed, skilled in the arts of trust and forgiveness, a new humanity, a worldwide movement, a global network devoted to peace, so that beside every network of violence there is a network of love undermining, and if necessary absorbing, the hatred and the fear. Such people will be recognized as the people of God.

The great global need then is for us to commit ourselves once again to hearing Jesus, to really hearing Jesus. We all have someone whose voice we listen to most. Is it Jesus? But it's hard to start with the seventh beatitude if you've skipped the sixth. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." It starts with putting God back in the center of our thinking, no one else, nothing else. We are called then to encounter this God, to acquire this amazing God-consciousness, emptying ourselves so that we might be filled with God, stretching outward from our narrow, little selves, expanding into all that is, so that streams of living water might flow from within us bringing peace everywhere. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. And in the creative, courageous, faith-filled pursuit of this, we will discover for ourselves and then for others a state called beatitude.

– Dale Pauls