

Non-Violence (Part One)

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

Reflection 57 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Before this series of essays comes to an end, it’s important to take up the theme of non-violence. For two reasons. First, a new world in the morning depends on us, we who are Christian, drawing on the long line of teaching from Jesus about non-violence. Second, our credibility depends on this. Many, many people weigh churches today against the teachings of Jesus on this, on non-violence, and find us wanting, find us, for instance, just as likely to unthinkingly support the wars of our nations as anyone else. And if we don’t catch the irony on this, many others do.

Consider, for instance, the seventh of Jesus’ beatitudes, in Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” But first, before I emphatically proclaim this beatitude, I would like to go back to the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” I go back to this beatitude 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 and the tiresome preoccupations of 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, I think, to still 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? In our militarized nation?

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 perhaps it did at Munich in 1938 (although that whole story is bit more complicated than warmongers tell us), 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, proclaiming, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

What Jesus actually said – well, what the text in Matthew 5:1 says – is, “His disciples came to him and this is what he used to teach them –

“Blessed are the poor in spirit ...
 Blessed are those who mourn ...
 Blessed are the meek ...
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right ...
 Blessed are the merciful ...
 Blessed are the pure in heart ...
 Blessed are the peacemakers ...
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right ...”

These, we learn, are the core values, the things that matter most to Jesus. He starts not with a perfect church or perfect doctrine, but this, “How blessed, how joyful, are the peacemakers, those who actively work for peace, who face issues squarely and take whatever actions lead to lasting reconciliation. They will be recognized as God’s children.” A new world depends on this. New life depends on this. New creation depends on this. This is, Matthew says, what Jesus taught and kept on teaching.

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? Why is there not yet a new world in the morning?

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.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week