***WHAT KIND OF PEACE?***

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Texts: Luke 12:49-53 and Hebrews 12:14-17

Five weeks ago today Karen and I awoke to a beautiful Sunday morning at the rural Bed and Breakfast of Agnes and Angus on the Isle of Harris off the west coast of Scotland. After a hearty traditional Scottish breakfast that included Karen’s not-so-favorite black pudding – key ingredient: “hemoglobin” – we traveled up the coast a short way with our friends Derick and Morag Macaskill, parked the car, and began a hike out along the coast to the ruins of the Northton Temple, known in Gaelic as Rubh an Teampaill. For over a mile we followed a path that rose and fell through the machair of grassy fields dotted with wild flowers and meandering sheep above a coastline of rocky cliffs and several beautiful beaches, though swimmers were few as temperatures were in the 60s – in the air AND in the water!

The stone ruins of the medieval temple can be seen from a distance. It stands alone on a grassy point of land above a spate of rocky coastline. All that remain are the four walls of the church which was not much bigger than our chapel. The only sounds there were the lapping of the waves, the steady blowing of the wind, and the occasional bleating of the sheep. Far from any town, village, or other signs of civilization, the handful of monks who worshiped there centuries ago enjoyed a beautiful bucolic setting in which to contemplate God and the wonder of God’s creation. On that Sunday with the sun sparkling on the sea, flower-flecked fields around us and rising up the hill behind us, a fresh breeze blowing, and the ancient stone walls standing in mute testimony to the faith of generations past, we felt we were indeed in holy space, near to God, and so we lingered awhile in sacred silence with peace like a river in-a our souls.

Where do you find that kind of peace? Is it peculiar to those holy spaces, those thin places between heaven and earth like the Northton Temple and the isle of Iona which stand far from the messy reality of day-to-day living in a chaotic world? Is it in such silent, solitary spaces where the whispered voice of God can be most clearly heard and the presence of God most vividly experienced, or is it in the soaring voices of a gifted choir echoing off the stone walls of a cathedral amid the flock of the faithful? Where do you find that kind of peace in-a your soul – and what kind of peace do you find there?

The week before we hiked out to the remote ruins of the Northton Temple we were in the heart of London touring the Churchill Museum. It is located underground, beneath the government buildings at Whitehall, a few blocks from Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey. It includes the bunker where Winston Churchill and the British government sought refuge from the bombs falling on London in World War II. There in smoky, Spartan rooms the war was waged, strategies mapped out, and casualties counted as a nation sought a different kind of peace – a peace that would simply stop the bombs and the killing and the chaos of war. In that museum there are some holy spaces as well, or perhaps more appropriately *holy moments* when the grim reality of that brutal war inspires whispered prayers of “Lord, have mercy upon them!” and “Let there be peace on earth.”

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to “pursue peace with everyone.” But he doesn’t say what kind of peace we are to pursue. He doesn’t say, “Pursue a cessation of violent hostilities” or “Pursue an inner sense of calm and serenity.” He says, “Pursue peace – with everyone!” He doesn’t say, “Pursue peace with those who are nice to you or those who have something to offer you.” He says, “Pursue peace with ***everyone***” which I am pretty sure means, “Pursue **peace** with **everyone**.” That’s not easy, because there are a whole lot of folks in that *everyone* with whom we have little or no interest in pursuing peace – vile people, evil people, cruel people, some Republicans for Democrats and some Democrats for Republicans, people who are on Santa’s “naughty list”. Why should we pursue peace with any of them, and what kind of peace should we pursue?

“Dear God,” writes little Peter. “Please send Dennis Clark to a different summer camp this year.” “Dear God,” writes little Larry. “Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they each had their own rooms. It works out OK with me and my brother.” Is that how we pursue peace – by separating ourselves from those with whom we are in conflict, by putting physical distance between us so that we don’t “kill each other so much”? If the peace we are to pursue is simply the absence of violence then maybe that will work for a while – but there are only so many camps to which to send all the Dennis Clarks with whom we don’t get along, only so many rooms in the house to escape our brothers and sisters, and so that peace is an uneasy peace that lasts only until we inevitably meet again. If not that kind of peace, then what kind of peace are we to pursue?

“Pursue peace with everyone,” writes the writer to the Hebrews, but then he adds, “*and pursue the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble...*” Peace and holiness go hand in hand for the writer to the Hebrews. The peace we are to pursue is not just the absence of war, not just the absence of violence, not just “not killing each other so much.” It is a deeper peace, a holy peace, a peace without bitterness or hatred or envy, a peace that overflows with holy gifts of grace, forgiveness, and love.

In his book *Father Joe*, Tony Hendra asks his mentor and friend to define peace. Father Joe replies, “*Peace is love, dear, and love peace. Peace is the certainty that you are never alone*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) That peace is a whole lot more than the absence of violence. The peace of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks, the peace Father Joe describes, is peace rooted in that love for God and neighbor which we call the Great Commandment which has its roots in God’s never-ending love for us. It is peace that continues relationship rather than seeking to separate from one another. It is peace that is elusive, and sometimes frustrating and messy, but is essential to our calling as followers of Jesus and brothers and sisters in Christ. It is peace that is characterized by how we live day to day because it is rooted in how we love day to day. A Native American proverb says: “It is no longer good enough to cry peace. We must act peace, live peace, and live in peace.” To which the writer to the Hebrews might say, “Amen.”

Yet if that is the Christian message – that peace is rooted in love and love in peace – then what are we to make of these words of Jesus quoted by Luke:

*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth! No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided three against two and two against three…*

Whole households will be divided against one another, says Jesus. Where is the peace in that!

The source of conflict of which Jesus speaks is rooted in a commitment to follow him. He recognizes that not everyone will embrace his message, not everyone will be willing to love their neighbors, turn the other cheek, and forgive seventy times seven times. Jesus has no illusions that his message will be unanimously embraced and suddenly bring tranquility to all people; in fact it will breed conflict, he says. For, his message is countercultural; it goes against the tide of popular opinion, the way of the world, and some Jewish law. “The law says, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say, ‘turn the other cheek,’” says Jesus. “The law says, ‘stone the woman who committed adultery,’ but I say, ‘let you who is without sin throw the first stone.’” Benjamin Franklin says, “God helps them who help themselves,” but Jesus says, “If you would be first in the Kingdom of God you must be last of all and servant of all.”

Jesus did not come to bring peace in the way the world sees peace – peace that is rooted in power, wealth, or fear - like the Pax Romana of his day or the Rule Britannica or Pax Americana of more recent times. Jesus came to bring a different kind of peace, peace rooted in love and forgiveness, justice and holiness, righteousness and grace, a peace rooted in God. That kind of peace would inevitably lead to conflict within families between those who embraced his message and those who refused to give up the old ways of the world. In saying that he would bring division to families, Jesus suggests that his holy way will not be compromised to ease family tensions. An unholy peace is not peace. An unjust peace is not peace. A peace that tolerates racism or persecution of dissidents or disregard for the needs of the poor and refugees is not peace. The peace Jesus brings, the peace that the writer to the Hebrews urges us to pursue, is a holy peace, a just peace, a grace-filled peace, a peace that recognizes that all people are children of God created in the image of God. It is a peace that may surpass our understanding but should never surpass our pursuit, for it is a peace that begins and ends with God.

Sitting beneath the ruins of the Northton Temple that Sunday, there was a great sense of peace – with God, with the earth, with the world. But there came a time, as with all good things, when we needed to leave that place and get back to pursuing peace with everyone else. We all need time away now and then, as did Jesus, - time to pray, to reflect, to find peace in-a our souls. But that same peace is the fountain from which we drink in returning to the world – to brothers and sisters with whom we do not always agree – in order to pursue peace with everyone and holiness in our own lives, so that the world might be a little more the way God intended it to be. Jesus has showed us the way to that way. So let there be that peace on earth in that way, and let it begin with you – and me! Amen

1. Father Joseph Warrilow (Father Joe) quoted by Tony Hendra in *Father Joe*, p.100 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)