

The Gift of Peace (Isaiah 9:6-7; Ephesians 2:13-22; Luke 1:62-79)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote one of my favorite Christmas carols. Now, don't get me wrong. I love "Silent Night," "Joy To the World," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and all the others. But Longfellow's carol, although written 200 years ago, is a painfully honest carol for our times, for the world in which we live, for our daily living. It's a carol that strips the tinsel off to brutally speak the truth. Longfellow wrote,

I heard the bells on Christmas day
their old familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet the words repeat
of peace on earth, good will to men.

(But) in despair I bowed my head.
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"for hate is strong, and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good will to men."

There's truth in this carol that must be acknowledged, if this season is to be more to us than just playacting. And the truth is that even though most of our Christmas carols, songs, and cards portray peace, peace is very much in short supply.

Our nation is currently involved in two wars. And even within our nation, unfortunately there are those in the media who selfishly maintain their ratings and style of living by hate mongering, belittling certain groups of Americans, planting fear in one group of Americans about another group of Americans, turning us Americans against one another. Furthermore, there's violence every night on our streets and even in many of our homes. Siblings struggle against one another for attention and love. Spouses jab at each other. We tell our kids that they're better than the other kids. We teach our kids to beat the other kids in the classroom and in sports. We gossip about others behind their backs. We're sometimes even at odds with God. "You expect me to support your church, God. Well, then you should have given me more money in the first place. And why did you have to take someone I love so soon, God? I'm not even sure you're up there paying attention, God. I think I'll just do what I want." And we're equally merciless

to ourselves. We keep ourselves frantically running from one idea or activity to another, always searching for inner peace. We think we'll have peace if we take a vacation, but then we find ourselves bored and not at peace at all. We think we'll have peace when the semester is over, but our lives are still full of anxieties, decisions, problems. We think we'll have peace when we retire, but there's no peace there either. We think we'll have peace if we move, but we can't move away from ourselves, and so all of our inner turmoil travels with us. We seemed doomed to conflict, turmoil, fear, and anxiety—to pull and tear at ourselves, God, and each other. The philosopher Schopenhauer once compared us humans to a Bulldog Ant. Apparently, if you cut a Bulldog Ant in half, the front and rear segments will enter into a savage fight. The head will grab the tail with its teeth, while the tail will sting the head with fury. The fight might last for hours. "In despair, we bow our heads. There is no peace on earth," we say.

But hear the glorious good news...

...from the Prophet Isaiah: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

...and from John the Baptist's father Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us...to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:68-69, 79).

...and from the angels, on the night when Jesus was born: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (Luke 2:14).

How mixed up, how topsy-turvy we humans get things. We think this season is about us giving each other gifts. But it's really about God giving us a gift—the gift of his Son Jesus—who in turn wants to give us the gift of peace.

To the desperate woman who touched his garment, hoping to be healed, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). He instructed his disciples, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house'" (Luke 10:5). Jesus did all he could to destroy the barriers that separated people. He worked to bring people--men, women, Samaritans, Jews, prostitutes, tax collectors--all together. He worked to

bring people together with God as well. He taught that the relationship with God should be so close that we call him "Father." On Jesus' last night with his disciples, when he wanted to leave them the best gift he could when he himself could no longer be with them. And so, for his legacy, he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27). Jesus gave his life to destroy the barrier of sin that kept people separated from God, from one another, and from themselves.

So, how do we get this gift of peace from our Lord?

First, we need to understand what this peace is that comes from our Lord. For it's not what we might think it is. When, on that last night with his disciples, Jesus said, "My peace I give to you," he added, "I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). There's a difference between the peace the world offers and the peace Jesus offers. The peace of the world is usually peace through military strength or power or threat. And, on a personal level, worldly peace seems to be the satisfaction we feel when we finally get something we've wanted—when we get that college diploma; when we get married; when we get a new car; when we get the sink unclogged; when we get a clean bill of health. The peace of the world, however, is temporary and elusive. Whether we're talking about international peace or the personal peace of satisfaction, it never lasts long. The Society of International Law in London observed that during the last 3550 years of recorded history, there have been only 268 years of peace. This means that since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than 8% of the time! The military balance is constantly shifting, and, on the personal level, we always want something else that we don't have.

The peace that Jesus gives is the peace that was at the heart of God the Father's plan from the beginning, way back in the Garden of Eden, when everything and everyone was in harmony. God has always wanted his creatures to be in relationship with him and with one another. But sometimes we make choices that separate us from God. That's what sin is. Remember the old story about the elderly couple driving down the street? They were listening to the radio as the man drove the car through the busy Christmas streets. Listening to the beautiful music of Christmas, the wife became nostalgic, and so she said, "Herbert, do you remember how when we were younger, we used to sit so close together as we drove along? It was so

wonderful back then. What happened?" "I don't know about that," said Herbert, "All I know is that I haven't moved." Sometimes we use our free choice to move away from God. And so if we want peace, we have to understand that God's peace is not freedom from conflict or suffering. Nor is it an easygoing, have-everything-we-want life. God's peace is living in a close relationship with God and all his creatures. God wants all of his creatures to respect each other, to complement each other, to coexist in his peaceable kingdom.

Second, if we want to receive God's gift of peace, it's not enough to just understand that it comes from being in close relationship with God and others. As Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald once said, "The desire for peace does not necessarily ensure it." We need to make choices that put us in a close, trusting relationship with the Lord. Such choices as coming to church, reading the Bible, praying regularly. So that we can see the love that God has for us in spite of our imperfections, our past sins, our mistakes, our failings. So that we can experience his forgiveness and in turn forgive ourselves. So that he can heal us.

Oftentimes, we're our own worst enemy. We can't forgive ourselves for our past sins, mistakes. When Dante knocked at the door of a Franciscan monastery, he was asked, "What do you want?" He replied, "Peace!" It's one of the deepest desires of our hearts.

What a beautiful example we have of this in the life of George Frederic Handel. He was frustrated with himself, cut off from other people, at odds with God. He was sick--his eyes were beginning to fail him. He was out of money. He felt empty, dejected, lonely, hopeless, and miserable. His creativity had disappeared, but then he came back into relationship with Jesus, and Jesus offered him the gift of peace, and he took it from Jesus' hands. Handel became a new person. Where there had been anxiety, conflict, fear, emptiness, there was peace. He grabbed his pen and paper and composed one of the most beloved pieces of music ever written, "The Messiah."

Third, to receive and keep God's gift of peace, we need to be willing to offer the same unconditional love he gives us to others, in spite of their

imperfections, their past sins, their mistakes, their failings. So that they can experience forgiveness. So that they too can begin to heal.

Fourth, the Lord doesn't give us the gift of peace so that we can put it on a shelf and admire it. General Omar Bradley said, "Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). The gift of peace is a gift we are to use. We are to do the hard work of being a peacemaker. One of my favorite Peanuts cartoons has Lucy coming to Charlie Brown and saying, "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. Since it's this time of the season, I think we ought to bury past differences and try to be kind." Charlie Brown asks, "Why does it just have to be this time of the season? Why can't it be all year long?" Lucy looks at him and exclaims, "What are you, some kind of fanatic?"

We Christians are indeed to be fanatics when it comes to making peace. We're to pray for peace. We're to do all we can to reconcile with those with whom we personally are in conflict. And in addition, we're to constantly look for ways to bring reconciliation to our families, our communities, our nation, our world.

Leo Tolstoy once told the story of a Russian youth, a conscientious objector to war, who stood trial. In the courthouse, the young man expressed his position, declaring that his philosophy of life came from the demands of Christ. The judge replies, "Yes, I understand, but you must be realistic. These laws you are talking about are the laws of the kingdom of God, and it has not come yet!" The courageous young man answered, "Sir, I recognize that it has not come for you, nor yet for Russia, nor for the world. But it has come for me." As it has come for everyone who accepts God's gift of peace.

An American years ago visiting the city of Damascus went to the famous marketplace. It was busy, crowded, teeming with merchants, shoppers, and tourists. Into that bustling place came a man riding slowly through the crowd on a bicycle, precariously balancing a basket of oranges on the

handlebars. He was bumped accidentally by a porter who was so bent over, carrying a heavy burden, that he had not seen him. The burden dropped, the oranges were scattered, and a bitter altercation broke out between the cyclist and the porter. Angry words, threats, hostilities were shouted. A crowd gathered to watch what was certain to become a bloody fight. The enraged cyclist moved toward the porter with a clenched fist. but just then, a tattered little man stepped out of the crowd and position himself between the adversaries. Then he did an amazing thing. He reached out, tenderly took the cyclist's clenched fist in his hands, and kissed it! He kissed the fist! A murmur of approval swept over the crowd. They laughed, then they applauded. The antagonists relaxed and hugged each other. And everyone began picking up the oranges. When the little man began to drift away, the American followed him and spoke to him, "What a brave and beautiful thing you did! That was wonderful but why did you do it? Why did you risk it?" The man smiled and answered, "Because I am a Christian. The Spirit of Christ was in me, and he gave me the courage to be a peacemaker. He gave me the courage to do the right thing."¹

God comes to us in the Christ Child so that we might have peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with each other. But it would be against all that God stands for to force peace on us. So the Lord offers us the gift of peace and hopes that we will accept it—by understanding it; by entering into relationship with him and with others; by actively becoming peacemakers ourselves. Thus God's plan for peace slowly but surely unfolds, one person at a time. And thus, with this surety, we can join Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the angels in singing...

"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
with peace on earth, good will to men."

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 2, 2008

¹ Moore, James W., "Standing On The Promises or Sitting On the Premises"