

The Candle of Peace

Last week I shared some thoughts around the theme of our confident expectation that, in God's good time, God will fulfill God's gracious purposes for the entirety of creation. Theologically, "Hope" is what we call this confident expectation. I suggested that how we structure our lives matters. Being a people of hope, we allow our lives to reflect those gracious purposes of God.

Today's scripture lessons revolves around what American artist, and Quaker or "Friends" minister, Edward Hicks, called the Peaceable Kingdom.

Unable to support his family solely as a minister, nor to maintain his work as a preacher and painter at the same time, Hicks transitioned into a life of painting, and he used his canvases to convey his beliefs. He painted over sixty versions of the Peaceable Kingdom, the first dated in 1826. The animals and children are taken from today's reading from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 11, especially verses 6–8, including the lion eating straw with the ox.

(sourced largely from Wikipedia?)

The peaceable Kingdom... the Messianic Age ... the kingdom of God, on earth as in heaven. These are each ways of talking about the same thing... the fulfillment of God's gracious purposes for all of creation, the reconciliation of all things, an age of well-being, wholeness, restoration, ... an age of Shalom. The prophet John announced that this was no longer out of sight – beyond some distant horizon – beyond the sunset – but was drawing near for God's people, in Jesus of Nazareth.

John had come in order to prepare the people. He was trying to help them become ready for this "in-breaking" messianic age. To that end he urged them "to bear fruit worthy of repentance". In other words, making a show of religion, "going down to the river to pray, studying about that good old way", going down to the river to be baptized as a sign of repentance... that alone won't cut it. If you want to avoid the "wrath" of the Messiah (which is directed against injustice, and unrighteousness) then you need to start making some changes. You want to be ready for the winnowing, and the wind of the Spirit.

The note of judgment, wrath, the announcement of fire for that which is not Good Fruit, not wheat... this is very strong in the preaching of John, as it has been in some forms of evangelicalism in the centuries since. It may make us uncomfortable, but at the least it serves to show us that God will not make peace, will not compromise, with that which is evil. Peace does not mean appeasement.

Rather, Peace means the overturning of all that is contrary to the gracious will and purposes of God. Peace is God saying to abuse,

“this ends here and now”.

Peace is God saying to injustice,

“this shall not stand”.

John called for actions consistent with repentance, not just a show.
He called for fruit worthy of repentance.

And this call was focused sharply toward those leaders of the people who had come from Jerusalem to investigate all the commotion. Actions consistent with, fruit worthy of repentance?

Isaiah put it this way...

with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

He was calling for the leaders of the people to BE shepherds protecting the flock, instead of allying themselves with the predators. (The Roman Invaders)

Perhaps a generation had passed, twenty or more years, between the work of John in the wilderness, and the missionary activity of Paul, including his letter writing. Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, in today's selection, assuring them that gentiles being included in the work of God was always part of the plan. In order to make his point, he cites one passage from Moses, one from the prophets, and two from the psalms.

He teaches that God's intention was always to include the breadth of humanity, in all our diversity. And so then he goes on to give some ethical instruction. If our theology says this about God, then how should we live?

He prays that God's work in them would result in their living in harmony with each other, and thus they would glorify God “with one voice”. He urges them to be a welcoming people: God welcomed you, so you should welcome others. He teaches that Christ gave himself in service, so that those who had not known God would praise God for God's mercy. We too are to serve. And he summarizes it with...

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

Ethical Instruction: Directions for daily living. Working for harmony.

Some of you may recognize the name M. Scott Peck. Like Hicks, only much more recent, he was a Quaker. He earned his medical degree from Case Western Reserve University. He had a career as a psychiatrist, working in various capacities, largely with the US Government. In the Army, he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, serving as chief of psychology at the Army Medical Center in Okinawa, Japan, and then working as assistant chief of psychiatry and neurology in the office of the surgeon general in Washington, DC. Then in civilian practice he was the medical director of the New Milford Hospital Mental Health Clinic and had his own private practice, also in New Milford, Connecticut.

And ... he was an author. After a slow start, his first and best-known book, *The Road Less Traveled*, sold more than 10 million copies. Back in the 80's a great many churches used it for small group studies. It is well worth reading, and discussing, if you have not yet done so.

He is also known for a couple of books on community building and peace-making, as well as being a co-founder of an organization dedicated to promoting community building and peace-making. He identifies some essential aspects, ingredients, or even stages in the process, and (as I see it) they are consonant with what we have been considering here this morning.

To highlight just one of his points...

A true community is a group that can deal gracefully with one another: "members resolve conflicts with wisdom and grace. They listen and understand, respect each other's gifts, accept each other's limitations, celebrate their differences, bind each other's wounds, and commit to a struggle together rather than against each other."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._Scott_Peck

The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace
(Simon & Schuster, 1987) ISBN 978-0-684-84858-7

Paul said we should learn to serve one another... (well, you know Jesus said it first, really. cf Matthew 20:25–28) Paul said we should be welcoming. Paul said we should always be working on harmonious living. I see Peck's teaching as a direct elaboration.

Down at the river, John had called for works that are more than a public show, works that reflect a real change of direction; saying to abuse, "this ends here and now", saying to injustice, "this shall not stand".

Today's candle is the candle of Peace: wholeness, well-being, shalom, restoration and reconciliation. Our world is fractured and our hearts ache for the Peaceable Kingdom. Lighting this candle is an act of faith.