

### Peace Begins with Us

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19 *May [the king] judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.*

Isaiah 11:1-10 *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

Romans 15:1-13 *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

### The Servant of God's Realm

The prophet Isaiah ministered in the period prior to Israel's exile. He saw the deterioration of society under a succession of religious and political leaders who were often guided by self-interests and the influence of the rich and powerful. He envisioned God's reign and the kind of leader God would raise to embody that reign--a messiah who would be filled with God's spirit. A spirit of wisdom and insight, who could see deeply into situations and know what to do for the good of all the people. A spirit that made the needs of the poor and all in need paramount. A spirit completely in tune with God's will for the people and the earth itself. The judgment and actions of this kind of leader would not be influenced by the counsel of those who had only their own special interests in mind. A leader truly blind and deaf to everything but God's desire for the well being of all creation. Such a leader would bring about God's reign of justice and peace in the human family. Isaiah's criteria for leadership is clear. The leader is a servant leader, a servant of God's vision for life and a servant of people, especially those who are poor, forgotten, on the margins.

However, it's not all up to the leader or leaders. Isaiah's complaint was not only about Israel's kings and religious leaders but also about the people who bought into the false leader's program. To bring about God's realm in the life of the society not only takes servant leadership but people who are living and working for the same just and peaceful way of life. People who in their own lives embody wisdom, insight, compassion, an overriding concern for the poor and suffering, and the kind of selflessness that promotes peaceful and generous community.

This is the biblical vision of God's realm that we have inherited and that we are to live by and work for. It gives us a way of measuring our leaders, both political and religious, and it gives us a way of measuring our own lives and our life as a faith community. It is the vision embodied in Jesus and it is the new life we have taken on in him. It is the life that is

empowered in us by God's spirit and its leading, gifts, and illumination of our hearts and minds.

Then Isaiah moves from the human community to the non-human community of the rest of creation. Here is that sublime picture of the "peaceable kingdom." So-called natural enemies living peacefully together. Predators and prey sharing the same pastures, their young playing together in the fields. Little children able to lead these fearsome animals around. Infants playing right over the holes of venomous snakes without being bitten. I don't know how literally Isaiah means us to take this picture. Non-violent wolves. Vegetarian lions. Poisonous snakes that tolerate kids romping all around their homes. These are images meant to ignite in us the vision of God's peace extending throughout creation. God has made the earth and all its creatures to live peacefully together, according to the life-giving patterns and rhythms God has implanted in the creation.

The problem is not the rest of creation but the human creature. We can read the whole Bible according to this theme: How God works with the human family to get us back in harmony with the whole of the creation. When we humans are out of harmony with God and each other, not only do we suffer but all creation suffers. Listen to these words from later on in Isaiah. They are a description of how the earth suffers when we humans don't have our act together:

*The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers;*

*the heavens languish together with the earth.*

*The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. [Isa. 24:4-5]*

Never before have these words sounded with more clarity than today. Isaiah's prophetic vision saw that if the leaders and the people continued on the path they were on, the whole earth would experience destruction. By putting his picture of the peaceable kingdom alongside his portrait of a promised messiah, Isaiah shows this subtle and real connection between human life and the life of the whole creation. When we humans restore harmony with God and with one another, paying particular attention to those most in need and most suffering, then the whole creation can breathe again. Order is restored, the order God implanted in the creation.

### The New Community

How do we do this? What is our vocation as human beings so that we help in this restoring of the order of life instead of destruction? Where do we begin?

We begin with our life as a community of those who live in Christ who embodies this new creation. We begin by understanding that how we each and together live affects the whole of creation either destructively or

restoratively. Our lives matter. The peaceable realm of God's kingdom begins with each of us and with our life together as a community of faith. That is what Christ has created in the church, not a religious institution concerned with its own status and perpetuation, but a servant community of human beings who are getting their act together to relieve the suffering of all creation.

Paul's words to the Christian community in Rome give us some clarity on how to do this. There were issues in that community and in all the new Christian communities that Paul knew, had founded, or had visited. They were the basic issues of human beings living peacefully and justly together. And Paul believed that dealing with those issues in the love of God embodied in Christ was the most important work of the church.

One example was the conflict between those who considered themselves strong and mature in faith, and those who seemed weaker, more susceptible to things that really didn't matter. The strong need to put up with the weak, said Paul. Spiritual maturity and depth is not about our own status but about showing a loving tolerance toward others. And this "putting up with," this tolerance is more than merely enduring with gritted teeth those who irritate or differ from us in their viewpoints. It is a full and deep acceptance of others as human beings like ourselves, children of God like ourselves, loved eternally and steadfastly by the God who made all creation.

In my thirty years of pastoral work, I have found that the same issues are part of every Christian community's life, including ours here. How do we get along? How do we deal with our differences in commitment, ideas, lifestyles, and the like? We will always have them. And the issues are the same whether in the wider world of those who differ from us politically, religiously, ideologically, or in values, or those with whom we worship and work in the missions we are engaged in. It involves the tendency we have to turn anyone who differs from us into an enemy. We become so attached to our ideas, our ways of seeing things, that anyone who expresses something different from that touches some deep insecurity in us and we lash out in anger, hostility, and violence of thought, word, or action.

The problem with Christianity is not the Christian message but Christians themselves. Christian faith is not believable for so many in our society and world because Christians and Christian communities themselves show little of the truth they want others to accept. When Christians and leaders claiming to be Christian speak and act in ways that designate others as enemies, build themselves into coalitions seeking power over others, and make war on others, physically, spiritually, morally, then the suffering of creation is increased, not relieved.

What is Paul's counsel? *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* This word "welcome" is very profound as Paul uses it. It means loving others as we ourselves have been loved by God in Christ. It means that the divine love that has fully

embraced us, with all of our weaknesses and failures and confusions, is to flow through us toward each person. One of the disciplines in "Our Covenant One with Another," the commitment made by Covenant Members in this community, states that we "will endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness." It is the most challenging of the disciplines. It is easy to believe ourselves to be loving, welcoming people, showing forgiveness and acceptance to all. But the reality is that as soon as someone expresses a different opinion about something or seems to us somehow inferior in understanding or faith, our impatience, judgmentalism, and anger flare up. We have made them into an enemy, an object, not a person like ourselves. And we set ourselves over against them, wanting to change them, to make them into the image of what we think they ought to be.

Welcoming one another in the way Paul means it is the same kind of servant spirit Isaiah spoke of in relation to the king, the leader. It doesn't mean that we abandon our convictions, callings, or views. But it does mean that we make room in our hearts for others as they are, not as we want them to be. This calls for a kind of selflessness. Not the kind that tries to wipe out our own uniqueness and identity, but the kind that sees ourselves as part of a wider world, the whole of creation, including the person right in front of us who we don't understand and are having a hard time with. Instead of trying to figure out how to make that person different, to bring them over to our side, or just wishing they would go away, we set ourselves to the work in our own hearts of how to truly welcome, how to love this other person. We deal first of all not with that person but with the walls, the thorns, the weapons in our own minds and hearts, those things that make us defensive and hostile, controlling and power-seeking.

Paul offers finally a prayer for the Christian community, that *the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Again, the touchstone for how we relate to one another is the way God has related to us. God's welcoming love for us and all people is steadfast and encouraging. It is not always ready to throw in the towel. It is not discouraging, harping on our sinfulness or weakness, but fanning the smallest flames of goodness and beauty in us. If God loves us in this way, says Paul, then that's the way we can love each other. That's the way we keep becoming the new community. That's the way we can be confident that our lives and our life together are making a difference in the whole of creation, restoring peace, restoring God's life-giving order. All of this does not mean we abandon the issues of peace and justice in the larger society and world. It simply means that what we envision and work for there flows out of what we are working for and experiencing in ourselves and our life with one another—the peace of God's reign.