

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
August 27, 2006

The Family Business

Isaiah 9:2-7
Matthew 5:1-12

I

I want to reflect with you today on Jesus' saying from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers." (You Monty Python fans out there, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I am not going to begin with that zany bit from "The Life of Brian" -you know, "Blessed are the cheesemakers" - although it's awfully tempting..)

Peace is an abstraction, and as such, it's hard to talk about. I know that my eyes would glaze over after the first few minutes of a talk on "peace," so I won't feel bad if yours do too! It's not easy to get excited about an abstraction. But it's even harder to talk about peace because for all practical purposes peace is an unknown commodity. What we know best, in gruesome detail, is war and angry upheaval. Un-peace is on TV and in the papers every day. It also rages in us and between us. Many of us are fighting intimate and domestic battles that don't

make the headlines, but are devastating all the same. There isn't much peace around.

Many people have given up in the idea that peace is even possible. When PT Barnum first started putting on circus shows, he staged a tableaux of the famous passage from the Prophet Isaiah that we have come to call "The Peaceable Kingdom" – a real live lion and a real live lamb in the same cage, lying down together. People marveled at it, and they begged him to keep the exhibit in all his future shows, to which he replied, "I will indeed, as long as the supply of lambs holds out." Get real, a lot of people say. Peace is not attainable while there is still a supply of sin in the world.

And yet we long for it. We long for peace. I'm just back from a restful vacation, and one of the things I got in touch with in those three weeks is how much I long for peace. Peace among nations and peoples. Peace in some of my relationships that are wounded by mistrust. Peace in the city. Peace in my own spirit.

Don't you wish that reason and respect set the tone of our politics? Don't you wish your

workplace were less stressful? Don't you wish you could find a way of communicating with your "significant other" or your children or your co-workers that does not involve volcanic eruptions, or long frigid silences? Don't you long to know yourself in God's sight and find wisdom and equilibrium in your inner life? If only warring nations would lay down their arms. If only we could be civil to one another. If only the "war" on poverty could come to a happy end. If only we would stop injuring the planet. If only we could all get along!

You will add your own things to this wish list for peace—and for a little peace and quiet! But, as many wise people have pointed out, tranquility by itself is not the same as peace. The mere absence of conflict is not really what we long for in our heart of hearts. We long for what the Hebrew Bible calls *shalom*.

Shalom is one of those shining words that carry an excess of meaning, more than can be captured in translation. It means healing and wholeness, welfare and serenity, prosperity and happiness, beauty and delight, harmonious relationships and good will. *Shalom* is the umbrella word for "the

way things should be"—the way a gracious and generous God intended all life to be.

Jews routinely greet each other with this word of deep satisfaction—*shalom!* What a poignant greeting it is, recalling the purposes of creation and the pleasures of Eden. It is especially so these days, when peace is in such short supply for the Jewish State and its Arab neighbors, who also greet each other with peace—*salaam*—and whose every mention of the prophets Muhammed, Moses, and Jesus is followed immediately by the phrase, "peace be upon him."

Every Sunday morning the first words you hear from worship leaders here at FCC are "Peace be with you," or "Grace and peace to you from God." Perhaps some of you would prefer more variety and creativity in the greeting, but I think there is a special value in sticking to these words and maintaining this routine. "Peace be with you" is a quintessentially Christian way of beginning worship—in fact, it is the most ancient and the most pervasive form of greeting among Christians—and it represents that same generous and hopeful blessing of *shalom* that Jews and Muslims offer each other.

You can never get enough of such a blessing. It is necessary for life, like water, like light. That's why we pronounce it upon each other Sunday after Sunday. In the same way, when we make our weekly ruckus after the confession, embracing and shaking hands, we are not being merely friendly. We are sharing Christ's gift of reconciliation, his *shalom*. Extending peace to one another week after week is one way we learn that peace is the heart of the gospel.

Ah yes, but...If only peace came to us simply by wishing. If only we could have peace by repetition, peace by incantation. But it's not that simple. Peace is first a gift, and that's why we must pray for it. But it is also a habit, a virtue, and that means we must practice it. Acquiring the habit of peace means replacing other habits we have fallen into over our lifetimes, habits that do not make for peace. This means we have to grow and change. And here is where things get dicey.

To "give peace a chance," as the old Beatles song goes, we have to make room for it—and there's not much room for it if we are trying to

hold onto everything as if what we have is truly
"ours." There's not much space for it if we
admit only one point of view—our own. There's no
way peace can get a purchase point in our hearts
if our hearts are already crowded with the
unfinished business of forgiveness, un-given and
un-received. We long for peace, but we aren't
willing to give up being in control and being
right.

When we are unable or unwilling to soften up the
ground for peace, the seed of peace can't grow.
Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai understands this
well when he writes:

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From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the
place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

If we want to learn to be peacemakers, we will have to spend time acquiring the habit. That means, among other things, being tutored by a Master, someone who knows considerably more about it than we do. Do you want to be a peacemaker? Ask yourself—How much time do I spend now reading and meditating on the gospels and getting to know in them the one who is called the Prince of Peace? Am I studying Jesus, studying the saints living and dead who after his example have practiced the habits of peace? Are we helping each other develop peaceful Christian reflexes here in this congregation? Do I pray for the gift of peace insistently, in season and out?

II

"Blessed are the peacemakers." In a sermon he preached on this saying of Jesus, Martin Copenhaver notes that Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the peace-lovers" or, "Blessed are the peace-full." He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." They are not the same thing. You can be a peaceful person or even a peace-lover, and not be a peacemaker. Sometimes, for example, peaceful people may be simply passive people.

I've been there and done that. There was an administrative staff person at the seminary where I taught who was, simply put, a nasty woman, a bully. She had a ferocious spirit, rude and selfish. Several generations of faculty, staff and students had been subjected to her abuse. More than one president and every dean in living memory had been afraid of her; and although some of us felt sorry for her—what an unhappy and disappointed soul she was!—and most of us actively disliked her, none of us wanted even to *think* about confronting her.

We were all persuaded that holding her accountable would unleash Armageddon. It was easier to leave her alone and make accommodations. Those who accommodated her thought we were doing it to keep the lid on, to keep the peace, but she was the only person whose peace was thereby undisturbed. The rest of us were in constant turmoil, fuming and miserable all the time. The whole institution was held hostage to a false idea of what makes for peace in a human community.

Being a *peacemaker* means being willing to speak a truth that shatters the illusions of tranquility.

It can require creating choppy waters for a little while in order to get to smoother seas later. As Martin writes, "a peacemaker often begins making peace by disturbing the peace, or at least by disturbing what passes for peace."

III

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." He also said, "They will be called children of God." *Children of God*. It turns out that peacemaking is what Martin calls "the family business." Now, once you know something about what peacemaking involves, you will understand right away that it is not a business we would have asked for. But when we are baptized into the family of God as Christians, God gives it to us as an inheritance. It's one of those bequests you wonder if you might be better off without. Peacemaking, after all, is a difficult and dangerous business. Peacemakers often die young—and not in their beds. And yet, it is our baptismal calling. (Martin wryly notes that it would be good to keep this in mind when we baptize our children. We always make a big deal about welcoming them into the Christian family, but we rarely mention the fact that by doing so, we are putting them at risk. If they should

develop a strong family resemblance to Jesus, it will mean trouble!)

What gets peacemakers into trouble is that they see things differently from most people. They see a larger picture than most of us want to see or are able to see, except in hindsight. They see things from God's point of view ahead of time. In the Lord's Prayer we routinely pray for the kingdom to come. Peacemakers see the kingdom before it arrives. And they live in it, behaving according to its norms, not according to the norms of the so-called "real" world.

The writer Fred Buechner recalls that in Ken Burns' "Civil War" there was some grainy footage shot at the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913 when hundreds of old men from both sides returned to the battlefield to reenact Pickett's Charge. The Yankees, he recounts, took their places on Seminary Ridge, the Johnny Rebs took their places below. After a while the men in gray started to move across the field where 50 years earlier so many of them had been slaughtered. As they advanced toward the ridge, an eyewitness said, "We could not see rifles and bayonets, but canes and crutches."

As they approached the Union line, they broke into a long, rebel yell. And then something unexpected—“ a. moan, a sigh, a gigantic gasp of disbelief rose from the men on Seminary Ridge,” the eyewitness wrote. The Yankees burst from behind the stone wall and flung themselves upon their former enemies. Only this time, unlike 50 years earlier, they did not try to kill them. They threw their arms around them. Some in blue and some in gray, old men embraced and wept.

Buechner comments, "If only the old men had seen in 1863 what, for a moment, they glimpsed in 1913." If only, at the time that awful epic bloody battle was fought, they had seen it from God's point of view. "They would have seen not war between enemies, but tragic conflict between brothers. To be a peacemaker, to be a child of God, is to seek and trust God's point of view more than our own." It is easy in retrospect. We all do it from hindsight. "But to be a peacemaker is to see it in real time, while conflict is still hot and battles are still being waged."

There's an old Hasidic story about a rabbi who asks his students, "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?"

One guessed, "When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?"

"No," said the rabbi.

"When you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grape vine?"

"No," the rabbi said.

"Tell us the answer then," said the students.

He taught them, "It is when you can look into the face of human beings and you have enough light to recognize them as your kin. Until then it is night, and the darkness is still with us..."

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus said, "for they shall be called children of God."
Blessed indeed.