

“MAKING SPACE FOR PEACE”

Psalm 122; Luke 19:41-48

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When I come across references to Israel and Jerusalem in the Bible, I often feel compelled to qualify them by saying that the Bible is not talking about the present city of Jerusalem. But today's reading... well, it's not a stretch for us to imagine what Jesus is feeling when he says, "If you, Jerusalem, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!"

Many of the Jews in Jesus' day longed for the restoration of the nation, for the end of Roman occupation. But the leadership in the temple was not so eager for independence. They owed their positions of authority and their economic well-being to the Romans. And they held them only as long as they were able to maintain the "peace." Of course, it had been like this for nearly 500 years under Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires prior to the Romans.

So even though Jesus was not an advocate of violence, he was viewed as a threat to the "peace." He has been calling the people to repentance, to change their way of thinking about the faith. He has announced the coming of the kingdom of God and in this passage speaks of the "time of your visitation from God." Had Jerusalem recognized the things that make for peace, things might have gone very differently. Jesus' grief over the city is compounded by this sense of a missed opportunity.

Things are not much better today with the nation of Israel restored. One might say that the seventy-five year conflict between Israel and Palestine is also a story of missed opportunities. It began poorly with the repression of Arab peoples already living on the land. I find it ironic that we still speak of an occupation. Without getting too much into the complexities of the situation, I want to lift up one factor that has stood in the way of coming to a peaceful resolution: the world's refusal to really "see" the Palestinian people.

I put it this way because making peace begins with attending to the people and aspects of a conflict that are not seen. Often people talk about the importance of hearing both sides in a controversy (as if there were only two sides), but much of the time one side is already being heard: the side with authority, power, and voice. We've been getting more of a balance of reporting the last couple of years but for decades I heard about suicide bombings, terrorist attacks, and Palestinian violence and nothing about what was actually happening in the occupied territories. Even today, I know a great deal about Israelis and still very little about the Palestinians.

But it's not really the Middle East that I have on my mind today. When I hear Jesus' sorrow over Jerusalem and its inability to see the things that make for peace, I think about our century's long struggle to address issues around race. We have had our opportunities. The abolition of slavery at the time of the civil war could have ushered in a new era of

racial equality and mutual respect, but the end of reconstruction a short decade later revealed the depth of the bigotry and discrimination that kept African Americans on the bottom rung of social class and economic inequality. Jim Crow became the new tool for keeping black and brown down. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's went a long way to ending Jim Crow, but racism continues to be an active force in our society.

Some white people have tried to address the problem by adopting a "colorblind" stance toward others, but ignoring race, treating everyone the same, refuses to recognize important differences in culture and experience. We cannot really know another person apart from their race. If we are to see the things that make for peace, and see this day as a visitation from God, then we need to see people... really see people. When we invest our time into knowing someone... well, that's when we really begin to care about that person.

According to Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, "Seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem. The fact that the meaning of race may evolve over time or lose much of its significance is hardly a reason to be struck blind. We should hope not for a colorblind society but instead for a world in which we can see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love" (244).

Martin Luther King Jr. referred to the justices in the Supreme Court Dred Scott case as "victims of a spiritual and intellectual blindness. They knew not what they did," he said, "The whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated through spiritually ignorant persons" (241).

Making space for peace means building bridges, not walls... getting out of our segregated worlds geographically and culturally... letting go of our ignorance and getting to know people who live in a different world from our own.

If we fail to do this, then the best we can hope for are cosmetic changes that don't touch the very structures that permit racism to flourish. We can treat this black woman or this brown man fairly, but we will never penetrate to the experiences and structures that make his or her life so challenging. We can put a stop to "racial hostility" but not to the "racial indifference" that supports a justice system applied inequitably. To put it another way, we will have only achieved the uneasy "peace" of Jerusalem and missed the opportunity for a more genuine, lasting, and deep peace.

I don't have time to get into Alexander's claim that mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow. Our country puts more people in prison than any other country in the world and over 80% of them are minorities. She doesn't think we'd be in this place today, "if we had actually learned to show love, care, compassion, and concern across racial lines during the Civil Rights movement..." (p. 177).

Making space for peace means looking deeply into the person before you, and seeing the world that has given and continues to give shape to his or her life. It is not enough to be okay, to take no offense with people. Indifference will not heal us or our world.

Making space for peace is one thing that Donna Odom and SHARE are doing in Kalamazoo. We had them here last spring in our education class. We were pleased to have our high school history learnings enhanced as we explored the history of slavery and Jim Crow. Learning more about white privilege helped to undermine our racial indifference. I hope that many of you will continue the education by attending SHARE's major event, the Summit on Racism in November. It's not too late to register. There's so much to learn, so many more things to see before we can recognize the things that make for peace.

Jerusalem! I don't want to be that city which Jesus mourns over as he enters it to face his own death. I want to be the follower of Jesus who understands the things that make for peace... the one who sees and loves the neighbor... the one who hears the cries of slaves in Egypt... the one willing to search out truth at whatever cost and be made free.

Edward Long wrote these words at the height of the cold war. He was speaking in the context of the rise of militarism, but his words seemed apt to our world 25 years later. He wrote:

"A concern for justice consistent with the search for peace will transform this paltry, selfish concern about resources. It will refuse to settle blandly for the continuation of indifference. It will condemn the protection of privilege that results in such violence to human dignity as quietly takes place through the present ordering of priorities" (p. 43).

May God grant us courage and strength in the call to make peace amidst the chaos and distractions of our day. May we learn to embrace each other, to love and care for one another, to see each other fully. Amen.

Resources:

Peace Thinking in a Warring World: An Urgent Call for a New Approach to Peace. Edward Leroy Long, Jr. Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1983.

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. Michelle Alexander. The New Press: New York, 2012.