

The Peacemaker Question

MATTHEW 5:9 (NRSV) *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”*

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EPHESIANS 4:25-32 (NRSV) *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something*

to share with the needy. ²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

L: The Word of God for the people of God. P: Thanks be to God.

Continuing a series sharing the title of the Jim Wallis book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, I again share my often repeated disclaimer: I take plagiarism very seriously; therefore, my manuscripts contain numerous footnotes and references that I don't always verbalize in the delivery of a sermon. I post my manuscripts on our church web page, and encourage you to check them out.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” My first sermon (May 6, 1962) “The Peace of God's Salvation” ~ Text: Jeremiah 6:14 (KJV) “They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, “Peace, peace:” when there is no peace.” (...slightly: flippantly, like saying, “Have a good day.”)

The verse is part of an oracle predicting disaster: God will bring a nation from afar who will almost destroy the land and the people. The reasons are many:

- God's stubborn and rebellious people all are corrupt
- The rich are corrupt
- The spiritual leaders are corrupt—like the temple leadership when Jesus drove out the money-changers—religious hucksters controlling a sacrificial system that made them rich and oppressed the poor—especially poor women.

And so, Jeremiah urges the tribe of Benjamin to “flee from Jerusalem!” and launches a tirade against the spiritual shepherds of Judah who turn a deaf ear to the warnings, and flippantly speak, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.

In Hebrew, the word is “Shalom.” Richer and deeper than our English word, “peace”, which generally means the absence of strife, the Hebrew word means both positive good *and* absence of strife. It comes from a verb meaning “to be whole or safe.” As an adjective, it means “healthy” or “secure.”

But in the Jeremiah passage, it almost is contemptuous—a flippant dismissal. But, like some lies, if repeated often enough the word can produce the illusion of peace. The illusion, however, is not the reality.

So, what does Jesus mean by, "Blessed are the peacemakers"? Of all the virtues Jesus names in the Beatitudes, why are the peacemakers the ones specifically called "children of God"?

Whatever it means, if we aspire to be peacemakers, our most severe test will be how we treat our enemies.¹ As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..."* (MATTHEW 5:43 NRSV).

Arguably, the hardest of Jesus' teachings. Abraham Lincoln said the best way to get rid of your enemies is to make them your friends." Again, sounds good—easy to say. So, what can we do?

Leaving Jim Wallis' outline for the moment, let's look closer at the Ephesians 4 text Rick Read earlier:

...putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Step one in becoming a peacemaker, I suggest, is to take responsibility in personal relationships—just practice common decency.

Let no evil talk (idle, useless talk; gossip) come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

One of my favorite verses! Commitment to civil discourse in public life has ended. How we talk to and about one another will sustain or undermine the health of any civil society. Jim Wallis reminds us, "The violence of language does, in fact, lead to the violence of actions. Character, respect, and decency are qualities that are not merely helpful but also are formational behaviors against the polarization and violence to which human beings are so vulnerable. ...The response to ugly words in politics is usually more of the same, rather than seeking higher ground."²

Back to Ephesians 4: a third role of the peacemaker:

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Folks, this isn't rocket science. It's more difficult than rocket science, because it calls for forgiveness in a culture geared toward vengeance and punishment. But if we truly are to "Reclaim Jesus," there's no other way into peacemaking. The need for forgiveness is paramount, because we can't always depend upon others

¹ Paraphrase of Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (p. 187). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

share a desire to "Reclaim Jesus." Don't sink to their level.

And there's one verse left in this text. Did you notice I skipped over verse 30? The need for forgiveness is increased because to refuse to forgive "grieves the Holy Spirit."

Peacemaking is not a "quick fix;" it's a way of living. Truth is, there may not be a fix. Conflict is a given; therefore (And here I return to Wallis' ideas), there is great need for conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution is both an art and a science, not just a naïve... Nonviolent peacemakers are decisive, practical, and science-based, applying measured responses that consider every factor, stakeholder, and repercussion.³

Research by political scientist Erica Chenoweth shows that, in the 20th century, acts of nonviolent civil resistance were twice as successful in achieving political and socioeconomic objectives as acts of violent intervention.⁴ Historian Theodore Roszak reminds us, "People try nonviolence for a week, and when it 'doesn't work' they go back to violence, which hasn't worked for centuries."⁵ Theologian Stanley Hauerwas: "War is impatience."⁶ The way of Jesus takes a more lengthy and deep approach than the quick solutions promised by attack, violence, and war.⁷

In my training and experience in conflict resolution, I conclude that Conflict can be resolved in almost every case if both parties truly want reconciliation.

You've heard my story about my two college roommates who got into a terrible argument that lasted for days—almost came to blows. Finally, the accusing party discovered his accusations were unfounded, and, to his credit, he apologized and extended his hand in reconciliation.

The offended party looked at the hand, sneered, and said, "Hell, I'd rather be mad!" Of course, he was joking, and the two resumed a close friendship. But not everyone who says, "Hell I'd rather be mad," is joking.

From Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., to the dinner table in any American household, the question always will be valid: "Do you really want to resolve the differences between you, or do you just want to win the fight?"

And in too many cases, one or both parties "just want to win the fight." In such a case, if we are to "Reclaim Jesus" and be peacemakers, what do we do?

First, pray a prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr when he was chaplain at the

³ Ibid., p. 196.

⁴ Andrew Klager, "Is Non-Violence Naive?" *Sojourners*, July 2018, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2018/nonviolence-naive>.

⁵ Theodore Roszak, quoted in *The Search for a Nonviolent Future: A Promise of Peace for Ourselves, Our Families, and Our World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010), 87.

⁶ Francis Phillips, "Is the Concept of Just War Still Valid?," review of Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir*, *Catholic Herald*, August 17, 2010, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2010/08/17>.

⁷ Wallis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 196-197.

United Nations: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Second, we take responsibility for our own relationship to a given conflict—choose to Reclaim Jesus and live in his way of peace. It's one of Jesus's most challenging teachings—one societies generally have not followed. It will not be easy. The untimely obituaries of peacemakers are many.

Among the earliest Christian opponents of the Vietnam war was a Jesuit Priest named Daniel Berrigan. He wrote:

We cry peace and cry peace, and there is no peace. There is no peace because there are no peacemakers. There are no makers of peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.⁸

The only promise associated with peacemaking is that they will be called "Children of God."

⁸ Daniel Berrigan, *No Bars to Manhood*, quoted in Jim Wallis, *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Communion Meditation

Jesus refused to confront evil in the world using evil methods.

Professor Andrew Klager, of Trinity Western University, wrote: "Think about the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus instructs us to reconcile with those who anger us, avoid violently resisting an evildoer, give more than what was stolen, offer the other cheek, go the second mile, love our enemies, and pray for our persecutors. Though counterintuitive, these commandments are often effective ways to disorient the recipients of our behavior. Instead of inviting retaliation, these actions say: "If you can't acknowledge my dignity, I'll take the responsibility to acknowledge yours."⁹

Jesus' ways often are "counterintuitive."

⁹ Andrew Klager, "Is Non-Violence Naive?" Sojourners, July 2018, <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2018/nonviolence-naive>. Quoted in Wallis, Jim. Christ in Crisis (p. 292). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.