

Guarded by Peace

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” -- Philippians 4:7

Some of you will remember the scene from the 1983 comedy *To Be Or Not to Be* in which the character of Adolf Hitler, played by Mel Brooks, tries to justify his military aggression by saying that all he wants for Germany is a little peace: “A little piece of Poland, a little piece of France, a little piece of Portugal and Austria perchance.”

The send-up was comic, but it was also a sad reminder of the grim years leading up to the second world war, when the real Germany wanted peace from hyperinflation, peace from political unrest, and peace from the humiliating privations of having lost the first world war. And the real Hitler said he could give the real German people peace by giving them *Lebensraum* – living space – by taking back from eastern Europe land the Germans felt belonged to them. And when Germany had regained its peace through expansion, Hitler's crazed but wildly popular argument went, Europe would have peace, and when Europe was at peace, the world would be at peace. All Hitler wanted was a little piece.

We know what happened. We're still waiting. We're still waiting for war to bring us peace. We defeated the mad man of Europe who killed millions by killing more millions – over sixty million people died in world war two – and we defeated the Japanese by giving the world the gift of nuclear warfare, the gift that we're now terrified of receiving in return.

And we're still waiting. We're waiting for the peace of war to bring us – us Americans, at least – lasting security and prosperity, lasting honor and moral leadership in a world without a great deal of those, and we're going to be waiting for a long, long time. President Karzai says it could be fifteen years or more before Afghanistan is able to govern itself as a western style democracy, and no one is saying for sure how much longer we'll be in Iraq. We've been in Korea for over half a century and there's no talk of leaving there, and Vietnam remains such a trauma in the American psyche that we don't even talk about it anymore.

But we still believe that war brings peace. We continue to sacrifice our children and our children's children and their children, along with the resources that could make life better for everyone and the planet to the killing machine that is supposed to produce peace from war.

And we'll consider it great progress when the soldiers leave and the corporations go in and a handful of executives who are already obscenely rich make themselves vastly richer by selling mobile phones and iPods and internet access to people who still need indoor plumbing and vaccinations for their children. When the whole world is wired and eating the fast food that's killing us and drinking Starbucks lattes, we'll have peace.

That's the vision of corporate America, and has been since long before Coca-Cola had a social melange holding hands on a mountaintop singing "I'd like to teach the world to sing" through a mouthful of Coke.

Today's text is from Paul's letter to the Philippians and it prays for a different kind of peace: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The peace that Paul prays for and promises the Philippian Christians doesn't come from trying to figure out how to combat terrorism or spread democracy or extend the reach of capitalism. Or how to sort out the banking mess, the mortgage mess, or the healthcare mess. The peace that Paul prays for the Philippians doesn't come from our sorting out our problems. The peace that Paul is talking about, the peace of God, is what allows us to sort out our problems. And it's the only thing, finally, we Christians believe, that will allow us any hope of sorting out those problems, because, as our own president said in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the use of force is "a recognition of history: the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

There you have it, from the mouth of a hard-nosed realist. War isn't the evidence of human reason but the evidence of the limits of that reason. When human reason has exhausted itself, the world turns to violence. When we can't figure any other way to impose our will, we resort to force. When we can't imagine any other way to halt aggression, we pick up our weapons and we start fighting. When reason fails, we turn to violence. That's what the world does. That's what our president says we do.

Here's what Paul says followers of Jesus Christ do: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The followers of Jesus Christ let the peace of God, not the call to violence from their leaders, guard them, keep them, preserve them. We Christians say we believe in Jesus Christ, in the Prince of Peace, but when faced with aggression we turn not to the Prince of Peace, but to the secretary of defense or to the commander in chief or to the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. In them we trust, despite what it says on the money. We don't really believe that the peace of God will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Or if we believe that it does, we certainly don't believe it will guard the rest of us; for that we need weapons of mass destruction.

Now I realize, of course, that most of you probably disagree with what I'm saying. You'll call me a pacifist. Some of you will call me irresponsible. Some of you will ask, What about just war theory? Some of you may think I'm better suited for the Mennonites or the Quakers or one of the other so-called peace churches.

And maybe I am. Maybe I don't belong in the United Church of Christ. Maybe I don't belong in mainstream Christianity. I certainly do acknowledge that I'm departing from 1,500 years of Christian justification of war.

But I've said to you before and I'll say again, to you and to everyone, that if any of you can show me where in the gospels Jesus says that we have the right to wage war for any reason, I will change my theology and I'll change my preaching. I know where St. Augustine talks about just war. I know where Reinhold Niebuhr talks about just war. But where does Jesus talk about just war? Jesus never says that we have the right to exact revenge on our wrongdoers. Jesus never says that force is sometimes necessary to deter evil. Jesus never even says that we have the right to defend ourselves and our loved ones.

Instead he says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ...'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 5:38-45).

And if you think that only Jesus said this, then hear these words of Paul from the letter to Romans: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . .” “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:17, 19).

And from 1 Thessalonians, “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

The message for Christians is crystal clear: responding to evil with evil is not a Christian option. We cannot base our behavior on the behavior of others. That is not the Christian path. Living as others live – confronting their violence with our own greater violence – is not the door that leads to eternal life.

Peace, we all say, is what we want, but violence is the path we choose to try to get there. Not just military violence, which is the most obvious and the most quickly destructive, but economic violence and domestic violence and environmental violence, as well. We have taken up the world's violent way of living and then, like children, we are surprised, disappointed, disillusioned that God doesn't bring us peace. No doubt some of you have heard that one definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again and expect different results. There is no clearer example of the truth of that statement than our insane belief that war leads to peace. War leads to war. Peace leads to peace. Peace is not the outcome; peace is the path.

As I said, I know that the vast majority of Christians, probably including many or even most of you, do not believe this. You may think it's a nice idea, but you don't believe it. You don't believe that peace is capable of leading to peace. You don't believe that peace is strong enough to guard not just our hearts and our minds, but everything we are and hope to be, in time and beyond time, in Christ Jesus. If even a simple majority of Christians believed this – trusted this, lived this – the world would be a very different place.

So let me close not on a note of despair, but with two examples suggesting the truth of these words from God's word. The first example is local, the second is global.

The local example is this church. When I was called as your pastor, peace did not reign in this congregation. There was a great deal of mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict. There were lots of hurt feelings, and those hurt feelings increased when a majority of you voted to invite me to be your pastor. The minority – and it was a sizable minority – who voted against me by and large left Faith Church. And we were left struggling to survive as much smaller congregation. And one of the guiding principles of my ministry here has been to try to restore peace not as where we want to get to as a congregation, but peace as the way for us to get there. I have tried, not always successfully, to create an ethos in this church that will allow peace to reign. I have reminded you, Sunday after Sunday, that the rules by which we play are different from the world's rules. I have urged you, each and every one of you, to let the peace of Christ reign in your hearts because a peaceful church, like a peaceful family, is made up of peaceful people. If we want peace, we have to live peace.

A few weeks ago, Mary's postlude was *Let There Be Peace on Earth*, and several of you were singing it as you left the sanctuary, and the most important line in that important song is “Let it begin with me.” Peace begins – begins and ends – when each and every one of us trusts God enough to allow our lives to be guarded by peace, kept by peace, preserved by peace and ultimately saved by peace.

“If it is possible,” Paul said to the Romans (12:18), “so far as it depends on you,

live peaceably with all." Friends, as far as our own lives are concerned, it *always* depends on us. Not one of us is ever forced to return aggression with aggression. That is a choice we make. We cannot control another's behavior, but we always can control our response to it, and our response, rather than the other's behavior, that will make all the difference – in our lives, in our homes, in our workplaces, in this church, in Richmond Heights, in this country, and in the world. "And let it begin with me."

The second example is much larger than our little church. It's the story of South Africa's journey from apartheid to freedom, freedom not just for black South Africans, but freedom for all South Africans. God placed a man named Desmond Tutu in that place at that time to preach the gospel of peace and forgiveness – the gospel of Jesus Christ, in other words – not to the oppressing whites, but to the oppressed blacks, for they were the ones who needed to hear it and heed it most. They needed to hear it and heed it not because they were becoming less and less powerful, but precisely because they were becoming more and more powerful as the evil empire of apartheid was continuing to decline and decay, and Tutu knew that when the day came for the overturning of that evil empire, as it surely would come, the only way for South Africa to break the cycle of violence would be for those who had been oppressed to forgive and to be reconciled to their oppressors. The Anglican archbishop of Cape Town steadfastly preached a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, and that message penetrated the heart of Nelson Mandela, a man who spent 27 years in prison for resisting apartheid. And when the minority rich white regime eventually collapsed, as all oppressive empires eventually do, South Africa was spared a horrific bloodbath because its first majority president preached and lived peace. Nelson Mandela, along with millions of other black South Africans, had every right, according to the world's standards, to seek revenge, but Mandela and Tutu and other black leaders knew that the way to peace for South Africa was not *more* violence, but less, and forgiveness is the way – the only way – to break the vicious cycle of violence. How different would our world look today had our own leaders heeded this ancient lesson from God's word in the aftermath of 9/11?

Peace, my friends, God's peace, is not something we struggle to keep; God's peace is what keeps us. Jesus the crucified said that those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for his sake and the gospel's sake will find them. Our Advent journey is not *toward* peace unless our Advent journey *is* peace. the peace of God which passes all understanding *will* guard us and *will* keep us or nothing will. Thanks be to God, the Prince of Peace.