



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Second Candle - Peace

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

December 8, 2013

From last week's reading by Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." And today, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain..."

The prophet of Advent gives us poetic images of peace. They are so lovely that they make your heart ache for wanting to see it in our time. Our yearning is so poignant, as the reality of peace seems so far away. Even as there are hopeful glimmers around the world that nations may indeed put down their weapons, we know that peace is a far off dream in our country. I don't think that we can give a simple definition to the concept of peace. We know that peace is not merely the absence of war, the Cold War proved that to us. By no metric was that a peaceful time. Instead it was a time of paranoia and fear and those are not peaceful emotions. In real peace there is the presence of calm as well as a larger view that includes awareness of the circumstance of others and the desire for their wellbeing. Before the Civil Rights movement, there were those who were convinced that the South was a peaceful place. That was only possible if you paid no attention to the daily reality of Southern people with black skin. I used to have a favorite sweatshirt. It said "If you wish for peace, work for justice." I think that it spoke of a powerful component of peace. For peace to prevail there cannot be abundance for some and wretchedness for others, fairness for some and injustice for the rest.

This week we will mark the saddest anniversary I can imagine on December 14th. We have to ask ourselves, are we any closer to peace? In some ways we seem worse off than before those children were killed. Hostility simmers barely beneath the surface of so many moments. While we hoped that the loss of so many precious young lives would stop us in our tracks and compel us to allow those children to lead us to a time of peace, the year since then has borne a different kind of fruit. Legislators who advocated for nominal gun control measures were threatened. Anyone communicating on the internet is immediately subject to hostility, insult and often threats. Sports rivalries are vehicles for hatred and now even murder.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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In October, Episcopal Bishop Dan Thomas Edwards of Nevada had to do something that has become all too common, write a pastoral letter to his flock in the aftermath of a school shooting. Something that he wrote has stayed with me. He quoted a Yale law professor named Robert Cover, who unfortunately died very young, who said that "violence is always an act of despair." The truth of that statement was like having my windshield cleaned. And I realized that peace cannot exist while there is despair. I believe when the Bible says that God "hears the cry of my people" it is the despair that is heard.

When you tune your ear to the sound of despair in acts of violence the scenarios unfold in ways we might not have considered before. Understanding the circumstances that birth violence does not excuse it but it can help us look for different solutions. Understanding the roots of despair is critical to the pursuit of peace. Despair sees no options and needs a way to discharge its pain. It's not unusual for injustice to be found at the heart of stories of despair. The gruesome history of Haiti's slave uprisings and the violence perpetrated on the white slave-owning population speaks for itself. When I listened to Peggy Wellknown Buffalo and Susan Kelly. I heard the despair of the Crow people who seem to have little recourse when they are treated unfairly and when no one hears them. It has the makings of a powder keg. The discordant song of a people in despair can only be harmonized by tones of justice.

The life of Nelson Mandela is a primer for peace. Born into a time and place that defined injustice, Mandela worked to bring freedom and justice to his people. He truly believed in non-violent resistance but even he suffered from the despair that makes violence make sense. This is from an editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer;

An irony of Nelson Mandela's life is that the African National Congress freedom fighter will forever be remembered as a man of peace. That could not have been envisioned in 1961, when Mandela helped persuade the ANC that violence was necessary to get whites to share power with South Africa's black majority.

The ANC began a campaign of sabotage bombing attacks. Mandela was eventually captured and convicted of trying to overthrow the government and sentenced to life in prison. He remained there for 27 years until changing times and world pressure culminated in his release. At some point, Mandela chose hope and forgiveness over despair and resentment. He was elected President of his country and received that Nobel Peace Prize. Together with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, his great friend, he created the path out of South Africa's dark past in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Mandela once said "Difficulties break some men but make others. No axe is sharp enough to cut the soul of a sinner who keeps on trying, one armed with the hope that he will rise even in the end." I've come to appreciate the link between hope and peace. Hope keeps despair at bay. Hope makes peace possible. Mandela's choice to advocate violence came after he had lost hope that the white minority that held power would ever see black men and

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women as their equals. While in prison, Mandela chose a different path. He let go of hatred and instead chose respect and love as the way he would engage the world for the rest of his life.

Another good quote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." No one knows this better than Christo Brand who was an 18 year old white boy straight from the country when he became Mandela's guard. The two developed a lasting friendship. When Mandela was transferred to other prisons, Brand went with him. He said this week, "He was my prisoner. But he was my father." Mandela created the atmosphere of peace for that young man and for an entire country. And if we are willing, the whole world can learn the same lesson.

If we are serious about peace in our community, our country and our world, we would do well to notice those places where there is despair. Changing despair to hope might do more than we have imagined, to change the condition of the world. Advent is a good time to take on that work. It gives the missional work that we do here a clear purpose and it keeps the reality of despair in our view.

"Let not the hope of the poor be taken away" that petition in our Morning Prayer services takes on a new urgency in this Advent context. Without hope there can be no peace, with hope even peace is possible.

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