

Fruit of the Spirit: Peace
Isaiah 52:7-12
Matthew 5:38-48

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you; not as the world giveth, give I to you.”

Peace is not a word that has characterized the week just past. Of the midnight audience in a Colorado movie theater, twelve are now dead and fifty-nine wounded; add to that number the countless wounded and seven dead including five Israeli tourists, the driver and the killer, by an act of terrorism on a bus in Bulgaria that portends violence of some sort in return; in Damascus four Syrian officials were assassinated by a bomb planted in a cabinet meeting, four dead who were surely complicit in the death of 10,000 Syrians since that country’s civil war commenced. I would be remiss were I not to mention the five who were killed in Philadelphia by gun violence on Friday night, bringing our death toll by guns thus far this year to 193 souls. I could go on.

Two words for peace dominate the biblical narrative: the first is *shalom*, the word found in the passage from Isaiah. According to Johannes Pederson, shalom “expresses every form of happiness and free expansion, but the kernel in it is the community with others, the foundation of life. Peace, strength and life belong together, because peace must be where the blessing is, the positive force of life....[Moreover] peace spreads everywhere with [the one] who is blessed. He himself is peace....” The second word for peace is *eirene*, the word found in our text and the root of irenic. She has an irenic spirit, we say, meaning she does what she can to foster reconciliation between those who are estranged, even enemies. Much like shalom, eirene describes a life that is completely happy, completely secure. It is a word used to describe human friendship and every manner of right relationships: person to person, nation to nation and creature to Creator.

The peace for which we were made, the peace that includes love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control has eluded us from the beginning according to the biblical narrative. Rather we choose to major in enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels,

dissensions, factions, envy: we major in the works of the flesh. Prone to evil and slothful in good, as the old general confession puts it, we seek not peace but strife. Much as I set out at the beginning of this week to spend the morning on the nature of the peace we are given by the Spirit, I am compelled to wonder first about our propensity for enmity.

Social scientists have been busy researching the reasons for this propensity. Concerning the enmity that results in gun violence, Richard Florida looked at a multitude of factors in his 2011 state by state study. Drug abuse? No association between illegal drug abuse and death from gun violence on the state level. Mental illness or stress? No association between gun violence and the proportion of neurotic personalities in any given state. Unemployment and inequality? No. Nor does he even mention the effect of media violence such as *The Dark Night Rises* that we all would like to blame for Friday's massacre. This lack of correlation led him to revisit a 1993 study in which the one significant predictor of gun violence that surfaced, according to sociologist Richard Nisbett, was what he called "the cultural vestige of pastoralism: a deep 'culture of honor' in which residents place an extraordinary value on personal reputation, family and property." Nisbett's study was later corroborated by a 2009 study of violence in high schools where students not only carried guns into school but used them to uphold the honor of their group, their family, their reputation. In this well-defended existence, irenic souls are hard to come by.

Needless to say, little has changed in four thousand years! According to James Bowman in a book entitled *Honor: A History*, among the nomadic tribes that ultimately became the tribes the Israelites met as they crossed over the Jordon, honor meant "the respect of the local 'honor group'—the family, the extended clan, the tribe, the religious sect. It meant maintaining a reputation for courage and loyalty, not being charitable to enemy civilians...." This is the default honor system, says Bowman, "the one you see in street gangs in America—you dis me, I shoot

you.”” As we all know, the “eye for an eye” code in Leviticus must therefore be read as an enlightened and radical improvement upon the way things were in the wilderness.

Likewise the command of Jesus on the mount in Matthew trumps reasonable retaliation with what is, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, the impossible ethic of love. Jesus says in so many words, “If you want to keep the law given to Moses on Sinai, love your enemy.” The command presupposes the honor of God conferred no less on the other tribe than on our tribe. Baruch Spinoza said the same some 350 years ago and was ushered out of the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam for the effort. “Spinoza argued that no group or religion could rightly claim infallible knowledge of the Creator’s partiality to its beliefs and ways. After the excommunication,” writes philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, “he spent the rest of his life studying the varieties of religious intolerance...the powerful tendency in each of us toward developing a view of the truth that favors the circumstances into which we happen to have been born.”

The radical counterclaim of the biblical witness, a claim missed by readers who believe more in religion than in the Living God, is that honor is a gift of God, a reflection of God’s glory falling upon each and every human being ever born, according to Karl Barth. “[Honor therefore] cannot be lost. It belongs to the *character indelebilis* of [each person’s] human existence. Honor is not overlooked, forgotten, nor misunderstood by God, not even where a [person] tramples it underfoot, or where it is trampled under the feet of others.” To be sure we can sin against our own honor [turn and distance ourselves from God’s call and command] or we can dishonor the honor of another [turn and distance ourselves from God’s call and command of the other] but the honor remains constant. God’s honor, then, is not a possession to defend; it is a gift to be received in “pure thankfulness, in the deepest humility and in free humour.”

So even though the enemy is a creature who may be against us, the enemy bears the

indelible mark of God's honor no less than you do or I do. Love your enemies, says Jesus whose life and death revealed love as an action rather than an emotion, as a self-giving rather than a self-securing, as a dying to self and living to God. In this utilitarian age, we must be quick to note that this is not a non-violent strategy for winning the enemy's heart and mind; it is not a means to the end of disarming the other morally or even converting the enemy to our enlightened perspective. Love has no motive other than regard for the other who bears God's honor no less than we do. Moreover love expects nothing in return and love never quits. Here I must confess that when I look down the dark corridor of history, I find this ethic impossible at best and at the very least incomprehensible.

But Jesus is only getting started. In the second place, the next words out of his mouth mean to offer concrete help in obeying a command utterly contrary to the human code of honor in the wilderness: pray for those who persecute you, Jesus says. "Praying for enemies," notes New Testament scholar Douglas Hare "involves a serious attempt to see them from God's point of view." No doubt our present enemies see us as infidels from the point of view of God's Jihad, but the claim of the God revealed in Jesus Christ is clean contrary to this. The other is one already reconciled to God through him whose assumption of our broken humanity ended the distance between creature and Creator, no exceptions, none left out. "We cannot earnestly pray for enemies without acknowledging our common humanity; they too have been created in the image of God," says Hare, "and no behavior, no matter how nefarious, can erase that image. [Besides] we cannot pray fervently for our enemies without reminding ourselves that the God who is able to love us despite our disobedience is able to love also those who hate us."

Barth puts the matter another way. The indelible honor we along with our enemies bear is the honor both of being given life and of being called into service by God. Alongside our common humanity, Barth emphasizes our common call to God's service, noting that it is

in service that two [human beings] learn to know and respect one another, not by simply observing or thinking about one another, or even by living with one another, however great their concord or even friendship....The honor of two [human beings] is disclosed and will be apparent to both when they meet each other in the knowledge that they are both claimed...for and by the service [the witness] which God has laid upon them.

In this regard, my eyes strain to see the beachheads of such prayer and service—beachheads of the peace that passes understanding--that seem so insignificant in relation to the death and carnage all around but that, nevertheless, help us imagine what it might look like to obey Christ's command: the camp for young Israeli Jewish and Palestinian girls called Creativity for Peace in Santa Fe where these girls spend the summer coming to know one another inside out; the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland where Protestant and Roman Catholic youth and adults have retreated for decades only to return to their towns chastened and changed by one another's humanity; work camps comprised of black and white, rich and poor, northerner and southerner rebuilding burned churches or blighted city blocks; the House of Hope in the Galilee where Christian, Muslim and Jewish young people make peace on desktops; the Galilee Circus here this week with Jewish boys catching Arab girls as they fly through the air on a trapeze. Again says Barth of the honor disclosed as two human beings meet each other in the knowledge that they are both claimed and so given honor by God that cannot be taken away, "It will be very small indeed. It will be only a very modest extolling of [God's] glory...perhaps in the simple reaching out of a hand to the neighbor, perhaps only in a small exercise of humility, sobriety or courage...." It will be a glimpse of the peace for which we were made.

In these things, I hold no illusion about the behavior of nations, nations and kings being the judgment of God upon our choice to trust kings more than God. But I do believe the one who spoke that day to a crowd on the mountain speaks also and still to you and to me. He commands of us what God has already given us in him. For while we were yet enemies of God, he loved us and in his person put an end to the enmity. Therefore as peace is the gift of living in right

relationship with God and one another, he is our peace!

“...remember first that you were God’s enemy,” said Dietrich Bonhoeffer of the words that converted him from a mere theologian to a man who would go naked to the gallows for love’s sake, “and that, without having earned it or being worthy of it, you were met with mercy.” This is the peace he leaves us, the peace he give to us for another. A small thing? And yet, in God’s mercy, perhaps it may be said of those irenic souls who seek to follow him, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Thanks be to God. Amen.