

I was talking friends about our Advent Wreath, saying this is the Sunday we light the Peace candle, and that the other candles are for Hope, Love, and Joy. One replied, what about a Reality candle? Indeed! I recall the prophet saying, “You say peace, peace, but there is no peace! Admittedly, it is difficult to hope for and pray for peace, love and joy when our world is so full of despair, hatred and war! Our conversation had been mostly about veterans who return with Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder, and with stories about their traumas that they usually keep stuffed inside... and with a high incidence of suicide. So where is the Reality candle?

I responded that the “reality candle part” usually shows up at the beginning of each sermon. We all can identify with a *lack of* peace, love, and joy in our lives. Besides international warfare (which we realistically can’t do much about), there is always some distress in our families and local communities. Rev. Quinn Caldwell, one of our UCC “still speaking” writers, is often a bit flippant or cynical, but some may say he is the “realist” among our writers. Some of us got his “Modern Christmas” book several years ago, and here is a little section on families at Christmastime, as Quinn reflects on Psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is when families live together as One.”

*Staying with family for the holidays? Even for those of us with kin we like, all the family togetherness this time of year can get to be a bit much. For those with more complicated dynamics in their family trees, it can be downright harrowing. If this describes you, you're not alone. Hardly anybody gets along with their families in the Bible... and what they do to one another in there, is way worse than your cousin's constant micro aggressions. Jesus isn't as bad as some, but even he plays the ungrateful child running away, telling his parents off, dismissing them and his siblings. But the promise of the Bible is that God is working in every one of them, whether we see it or not. **His***

Prayer: *God, you know how hard this can be. Help me bite my tongue when I should, act twice as lovingly as I feel, and make this family party as good and pleasant as I can. And until you perfect us all, make us kind. Amen.*

How's that for reality? And here is another lovely little dose of reality, back to a worldwide perspective, from a well known mediator for peace. His name is John Paul Lederach, professor at Notre Dame, and a lifelong Mennonite. He said he was in a seminar in Northern Ireland, seven years after some truce was made, and said: "*People were happy the agreement was still holding, but felt that Northern Ireland had fossilized in its sectarian relations... that things were simply not changing, and it might not get much better.*" Sound familiar? Sectarian intransigence, "fossilized" or stuck in our opinions and stances? Now, since professor Lederach loves Haiku Poetry, (5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables), he summarized this reality in a haiku: **Maybe, he says, this...Is as good as it will get...Peaceful bigotry.**

In families, in civil wars, in international wars, the reality is that Peace is an ideal, something far from achieved. We admit, as people of faith, that we are from for the ideals we sing about in our hymns and Christmas carols. That's why my sermon is entitled Preludes to Peace. What comes before peace? What are some steps along the way? There are many little steps we can take. (Quinn's prayer has a few: *Bite my tongue, Be more loving than I feel, Be kind...*) And I think the closing of his prayer is soooo important: "God, until you perfect us all, make us kind. Subtext: We all are very imperfect, so stop the blame game... and it really irks me that in politics, the game seems to be "who has the worst sins!"

So a really important step comes from John the Baptist and his words Prepare Ye the Way! Yes, the gospel says that John the Baptist

had a baptism of “repentance.” Repentance means literally a turning, a changing.. or we could say, a *willingness* to change. We all could use some transformation for the better. We cannot expect perfection from ourselves, and surely not from anybody else (I recall a French saying that The Perfect is the enemy of the Good... or in spiritual terms: Perfectionism is an enemy of Grace!). Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord is about accepting the fact that we all are imperfect, and preparing our hearts and minds to receive Grace, grace after grace, from God, and then extend it to others.

At the center of the Lord’s Prayer, we say: “Forgive us our trespasses (sins), as we forgive others who trespass against us.” Forgiveness is so central to Christianity! It is reconciliation with God *and* with others. We have not only imperfections, but actual mistakes; we mis-speak, or we act badly, and we actually hurt others. The doctrinal phrase “original sin” just means that we all sin, in one way or another. As such we need to get better at apologizing, to say we are sorry. Elton John got it right.. “Sorry seems to be the hardest word.” And the Fonz (the cool macho guy) on Happy Days could not admit that he was wrong. (All he could utter was: “I was Rrrrrrrrr...”). I was Wrong or I’m sorry is hard to say, but so important... I try to get “sorry” more into my vocabulary... I try to practice on smaller or unintentional trespasses (Sorry I stepped on your foot, or Sorry, I didn’t see that you were already in line, or Sorry, I forgot to feed the dog...) so I’ll be ready to say “sorry” when I need it for bigger things! ... Little steps on the road to peace... Preludes to Peace.

The Reality is that we are far from peace and we will always have a *longing* for peace, and will need to *work for* more peace. We know many little steps that we can take, starting with friends and family (Let there be peace on earth and let it begin *with me.*). Amen.