

Love and Peace are themes and goals of the Christian faith, and for that matter most religions of the world. We just sang the poetry of John Greenleaf Whittier. His homestead is right here in Amesbury, and his childhood nurturing was Quakerism, which is totally about peace! Whittier, writing this shortly before the Civil War, was also an advocate for the abolition of slavery, as we see in the last verse, “Then shall all shackles fall!” The original opening verse was “O brother man,” antiquated male-biased language, yes, but indicating Whittier’s vision that all humans can be like brother and sister to one another, that peace and love ARE possible, especially between people of different races.

I will be going to a music convention this week, about music with progressive Christian themes. So what is meant by “Progressive Christianity?” Well, the chief emphases are love and justice. One phrase the United Church of Christ uses often is “the love and justice of Jesus.” The love part is well known in all Christian churches... Many Christians emphasize love in the Cross... that God so *loved* the world that he gave his only son, or that Jesus so loved all of us that he went to the Cross, in the spirit of love and forgiveness, not fighting with us, or punishing us, but saving us with Love and Grace. If this is the only message, however, it tends to get individualized, to be only about *personal* salvation, personal peace. But we know that love and peace must also be interpersonal and societal. We know that sin is not only personal attitudes and actions, but that there is societal sin, often called systemic sin, and thus societal salvation, a salvation that says “no one is truly free unless all are free.” Oppressed peoples and classes of people need liberation, and liberation theology.

Since John Greenleaf Whittier, as an abolitionist, was certainly thinking about our black “brothers and sisters” let me share a story

from one of the speakers of the progressive convention I am attending this week. Rev. Jim Wallis, and activist in Washington D.C. for many years, tells of his teen years in Detroit Michigan. In his recent book, *The False White Gospel*, he says there was surely a white Detroit and a black Detroit. For college money, he purposely got cleaning jobs in the inner city, where he could meet black people and find out more about why people were so segregated in his city. Jim was invited to his new friend Butch's house for dinner one night. Butch was black, and his mother told Jim about what she taught her children: "If you are ever lost and can't find your way home, and you see a white policeman, hide somewhere, wait til he passes, then find your way home on your own." Jim remembered words from his own mother: "If you are ever lost and can't find your way home, *look for* a policeman; they are your friends. They will take your hand and bring you home safely." While this is indeed some 50 years ago, police brutality, especially upon those of color, we know is still an issue. Rodney King, George Floyd, and countless others.

We come to church to hear gospel words, good news, the power of love and promises of peace, but we know that sin is a part of the whole message. We know that peace does not come without much work for just or fair relationships, so we talk about a "just" peace, or peace *with* justice, the love *and* justice of Jesus. Senator Raphael Warnock, in the footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr., was the key preacher for our UCC annual meeting. He tells of growing up in relative poverty, and receiving the benefits of the Head Start program, that propelled his education, so he ultimately achieved masters and doctoral degrees. And yet, we heard just last year that the White House wanted to cut all federal spending on Head Start. Thank goodness and sanity, it did not happen, but we know there

were cuts to many other programs in the Department of Education, some of which was black history, the truth about racism and inequalities in our country, where the truth should be self-evident that “all (men) are created equal.”

Rev. Sen. Raphael Warnock said in his sermon Sunday morning, referring to new bans on any books, “The God I know believes in DEI, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Every child needs and equal opportunity” (to learn and grow, and be safe.)

Progressive thinkers like Rev. Jim Wallis and Rev. Raphael Warnock emphasize that while the USA is naturally becoming more diverse in its cultures, we need to fully embrace the ideals of being a “multiracial democracy” where everyone has a voice and human rights... like dignity, safety, and freedom.

I encourage you, if you can to come and bring a friend to the talk tonight by Rev. Dr. Jon Paul Sydnor. He was a co-pastor, with his wife, of my parent’s church in Walpole, MA. He is now professor of theology at Emmanuel College in Boston, and as you can see from our flyer, his recent book is called “*The Great Open Dance, A Progressive Christian Theology.*” I have read excerpts of the book on “Substack,” and I know that Dr. Sydnor will give a clear, concise and powerful presentation. It will be in the next room, using the big TV screen for some bullet points. The Gospel is good news about an “Open Dance” of Compassionate Love, inviting and including all. But it is also about Sin, which includes systemic sin, cruelties of governments and societal norms. Hence we also need to say that so-called “Christian” support for cruel actions of our government is actually anti-Christian, “heresy” to the mind of Jesus.

Jesus, in Matthew 25, insists that all should be treated with compassion, should have food, water, clothing, visits when sick or in jail, welcome when a stranger in a foreign land. The parable of

the sheep and the goats is sometimes called the “Final Judgement,” and is all about compassion. Assuming we do some sort of “life review” when we pass over to the other side, God or Jesus will remind us of the times we did or did not compassionately help those in need.

Let me close with a song from my warm-hearted compassionate friend who I will see this week. Ken calls this song “Song of the Refugee.” My sister-in-law Winnie will add her warm heart to these words. The vast majority of immigrants are in no way dangerous; they are refugees, they are powerless, and they are in great need: for safety, for jobs, for someone who will welcome them, befriend them, even defend them. As Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” So when we welcome “the least,” we welcome Jesus himself.

*I am a stranger here in a strange land. I've left behind me my home and kin. I am an alien, I am unwanted, and there is no one to take me in. Who will be friend me? Who will defend me? Who will extend me an open hand? Who'll stand beside me? Who'll walk before me, for I'm a stranger here in this land. Down in my homeland while you are sleeping, the voice of weeping is never still. Down in my village, place of my childhood, the soldier enters to maim and kill. And in my dreaming, I hear the screaming, while blood is streaming across the land. Who'll stand beside me? Who'll walk before me, for I'm a stranger here in this land. Here in your city, I seek my people who know my sorrow, who know my pain, who speak my language, who love my homeland, and in the ashes we'll build again. My heart is burning, my soul is yearning for my returning to my own land. Who'll stand beside me? Who'll go before me, for I'm a stranger here in your land.*