

Signs of Christmas all around us, springing up right after Thanksgiving. All the lights on front lawns, the lit up stores hoping to attract more customers ready to open wallets. All the music... and last night next door in our Meetinghouse there was a pretty amazing medley of songs from all over the world; Many songs felt like Lullabies, calm and peaceful, e.g. Silent Night.

But I have to remind us that poets and prophets do their best to tell the truth, and the sad truth is that there is little peace on earth. Remember the carol "I heard the bells on Christmas Day?" Not sung often! Maybe because of Longfellow's third verse: "*And in despair I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.*" How true of our world, so much polarity, hate and violence everywhere, that our Christmas songs for peace and joy seem pie in the sky, an illusion, a false promise.

So there is a good reason why many Christian churches observe "Advent" as a time of waiting and preparing. Last night, there was one very jarring song in Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols. It is important to note that Benjamin Britten was a Christian pacifist, writing during the horrors of WWII. This song is fast and furious, so the meaning of the lyrics almost escaped me until I slowed down and took a closer look! Listen to these lyrics:

*This little Babe, a few days old, is come to rifle Satan's fold; All hell doth at his presence quake! For in this weak unarmed wise, the gates of hell he will surprise. With tears he fights and wins the field, his naked breast stands for a shield. Feeble Flesh is Jesus' Warrior's Steed. His battering shot are babish cries, His arrows look of weeping eyes. If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy, then flit not from this heavenly Boy.*

This babe, this heavenly Boy, came to fight evil, with truth telling, peacemaking, tears of love, with sacrifice of his flesh if needed. The song echoes Jesus' words about being willing to take up our cross. It echoes the words of the prophet Zechariah, "Not by power nor by might but by my Spirit, says the Lord."

So, Peace does not come easily; the world prefers to fight. Peace is something that we have to prioritize, focus on, and work for! There is always a sense of **Not Yet** in our worship regarding salvation and ultimate peace. Remember what they called the Pax Romana? Christians and Jews know it was not really peace, but oppression and domination. Ultimate peace never comes by force, but between parties that negotiate and compromise, and have a level of trust that there is genuine good will toward the other.

The United Church of Christ I think does very well to always emphasize the "love AND justice" of Jesus. We can't just wish everyone "peace and love, peace and love," and think it can come easily. I think of how long Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter worked for peace. I've been reviewing his book on Palestine and the grueling days of getting a Peace agreement at Camp David, way back in 1978. There was indeed the proverbial "give and take" in those agreements; neither side, Israel, nor Egypt, got all that they wanted but they did make an agreement. What a shame that extreme elements in their people did not agree and there were soon assassinations on both sides. Peacemakers become targets, just as Jesus observed: "Prophets get killed, and you my followers will also be persecuted."

There has always been in the Christian Church a movement called the Social Gospel. It calls on the concept of Justice, and the word is not about punishment, but about Fair Play and looking after the poor and sick. Thus churches like the United Church of Christ speak of all kinds of justice: *Economic Justice, Racial Justice, Climate*

Justice, (Care for the poor, Care for ethnic minorities, Care for the Earth) etc.! One of the newer social justice movements in our city seems to be care for Native Americans; I think it was just the second year that our city called Columbus Day Indigenous Peoples Day. As with African slaves afterwards, there is no question that Native Americans were driven from their lands, as in the “Trail of Tears,” pushed onto reservations, and treated like lesser Americans. And yet the truth is that many of us turn to Native American Spirituality to increase our sense of God, to increase our respect and connection with land and animals. And many of us turn to the worship of Latin America or Africa to find the spirit of strength and joy.

While world peace, national peace or inter-tribal peace seem out of reach, Jesus’ peace was surely also a very interpersonal peace, having to do with love and forgiveness... yes, truth-telling, repentance for offenses, making amends also. The song is so true: Let Peace begin with me (the only place it can really start and take hold). If we have any hope for peace between larger groups of peoples, we have to practice all the skills of peacemaking at the very personal level. How about peace within families? Or how about *church* families?

The Congregational churches were called “congregational” due to the idea of being governed by the people themselves. We have no bishop, no cardinal, no Pope. So one key point is that every local church is autonomous (The UCC can “suggest” things, but has no actual power over any local church). And the local ministers, like myself, have no hierarchical power, but are “ex-officio” in all the committees of the church; governance is a rather democratic affair (small d). This is both beautiful and frustrating... because when all members get a voice if they want one, there are surely many differing voices, differing thoughts and opinions! In other words, there are

*a/ways* conflicts, and the real miracle (and test of Christ's love and grace) is to resolve them as peaceably as possible.

Saint Francis summed up peacemaking so beautifully in his poem, *Make me a Channel of your Peace*. These words are truly in the Spirit of Christ, the spirit of self-less love:

*1. Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there is hatred let me bring your love.  
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord  
And where's there's doubt true faith in you.*

*2. Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope.  
Where there is darkness only light,  
And where there's sadness ever joy.*

*3. Make me a channel of your peace.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
In giving of ourselves that we receive,  
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.*

*4. Master grant that I may never seek  
So much to be consoled as to console,  
To be understood, as to understand,  
To be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

This "channel of peace" is our calling... and the words of St. Francis show that it is all about self-giving, selfless love. Amen.