

# ***LITURGY AS PEACEMAKING***

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**I**t is an honor to be standing before you today.<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the invitation the Elders extended to be here to honor the name of Roger Nooe. Dr. Nooe is being honored today not only for what he did but for who he was. I am fortunate to have known this good and kind man. When Cindy and I moved here in 1965 so that I could attend Vanderbilt Divinity School, Roger and his gracious wife Nancy still graced these halls with their presence. I remember the first time I saw Roger in the pulpit. He was a tall, white haired man who took his warm receptive spirit into the pulpit and spoke to us from his deep southern gentleman's voice about a God of genuine love. His persuasive presence and insight impressed me. He and his family have helped establish the core spirit of this church for decades.

As I think about Vine Street, your heritage and my time with you, I rejoice at the witness that you make. This congregation has offered a strong and positive witness to God's unconditional love for all humanity throughout its history. I am grateful to God for my years with you and the ministry God allowed us to share together. I thank

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<sup>1</sup>This peace lecture was given at Vine Street Christian Church, Nashville Tennessee in May of 1998 to celebrate the ministry of Roger Nooe, Senior Minister at Vine Street between 1925 and 1951. It was presented by Dan Moseley, who served that congregation as Senior Minister between 1983 and 1997.

you for memories of genuine love and support. My memories bring a sense of peace.

## **DISTURBING THE PEACE**

But peace does not visit with all memories. As I was coming through Nashville, I drove downtown and saw the evidence of the tornado which plowed through this city last week. I drove through neighborhoods in East Nashville and saw the blue tarp roofs sticking through the spindly trees that have been shredded and scattered. I felt an ache in my heart for those who lost so much of what they owned – people who have struggled for a lifetime to acquire enough to survive and defend themselves against the elements – and then it is gone. I felt a disquiet in my soul not only for those who lost “stuff,” but for all the thousands in this city who have lost a sense of invulnerability. The dis-ease that is created by such an encounter with devastating power is earth shaking.

I then drove out to the cemetery to visit my wife’s grave. There, in the quiet remembering ground, I recalled the joy of 31 years of marriage and the pain of 3 years of disease as cancer stole her life from me. The memories of her life create in my soul some peace from the joy and some pain from the suffering. My soul longs for peace which hides in the crevices of the heart.

Later that morning, I hiked through Edwin Warner Park. I thought of the mother in Estonia who had buried her 4 sons who died at the hands of the Russian troops. I thought of the young woman held in the arms of a caring stranger as she finally made her way to a shelter for battered spouses. I thought of the little boy wandering the streets of Calcutta – among the millions of homeless children on our globe. I thought of all those whose past plagues them and who know no peace. I realized that there is a global community who longs to know peace they do not understand.

I realized that peace hides from everyone. I realized that we share a longing for peace with everyone on this planet. There is a

deep longing for peace within our human spirit. The human condition – seeking peace.

## **HUNTING FOR PEACE**

How do we try to find peace? Where do we look for it?

Peace is usually hidden behind fear produced by a perceived threat. We fear that which will take away what we count on for security and identity. We fear conflict in the church because we are afraid that it will steal away the relationships which have become so important to us. We experience the absence of peace when we visit the doctor's office and the word cancer is spoken. It threatens our sense of safety and security. We taste dis-ease when someone threatens to take away our child or our home. War rages within when we feel that our job is threatened by lower wages in other countries. Our stomach knots in fear when we believe that drugs will rob us of our children whom we love deeply.

One way we seek to find peace is to run from that which is perceived as a threat to us. We run from that which creates pain. I have done all that. I have not gone to the doctor when I had a problem for fear of what I might find out. I have avoided seeing people who have caused me some pain. I have closed my ears to those who challenge my own self-understanding.

We not only hide from threat that others cause us but we run from others we may have wounded. I am guilty of hurt and run. I have caused pain in the lives of others and because I am embarrassed or afraid of what might happen, I have pulled away. This avoidance is one of the ways we seek to find peace.

The nation has been tempted by isolationism. We have felt the threat of a global economy, and it is very tempting to build walls so that we can hide from that which threatens what we have come to count on. We have built walls of nuclear weapons to fend off the nuclear weapons of others. We have built walls with laws; giving up our freedom for fear that others might abuse freedom and engage in

terrorist activities which will threaten us. We have tried tariffs to protect our way of life.

Run and hide – and live in the peace of denial. That is a time-honored response to the dis-ease which comes from living in a world which feels threatening to us.

There is another way we traditionally seek peace. That is to try to destroy that which threatens us. We define those who are the enemy to our way of life and then exorcise the demons. We fight those who threaten us. We feel that they have power over us and that the only way we can control our own destiny is to exert power over them. We create weapons of destruction which will reduce them to size so they will not threaten us.

Thus, we respond in much the same way we do when we run from that which threatens us. We build weapons which will overpower the enemy. The only difference is that we are more likely to go on the offensive – preemptive strike, it is called. If we determine that the other is out there planning to use power to take away that which is ours, we are justified in destroying them before they can act to destroy us.

I have engaged in this kind of peacemaking in my day. I have been part of groups who believed that Lyndon Johnson was the enemy. During the Vietnam War, I believed that the only way to peace was to get rid of the enemy. I worked with thousands of others to march and to fight the enemy. I engaged in the same kind of mind games as did the administration – create an enemy. With the use of powerful language and media, the government is able to create a vision of the other person which is threatening. As part of the protest, we worked at creating images which justified our actions in protest.

I have done it in personal relationships. When I feel weak, I use the power of words to cut the other person down and thus reduce their power so that I can have more power.

We believe peace will be assured in our world by these two means – fight or flight.

But I would suggest to you today that the church has been engaged in peace making in a different way. Even when we didn't know it, we have been in the peacemaking business. Even as we have

been trying the world's way, we have been learning and practicing another way.

## **SPEAKING PEACE**

Here's how it works. The church has been creating an image of reality that is grounded in God's peacemaking activities with humanity. Words create worlds. We do not know our world until we speak it into existence. This is a basic biblical understanding of reality. In the beginning there was chaos. But God spoke and there were distinctions between light and dark, water and land, human and animal. Words spoken by God created life, which is contrast and distinction.

And God invited humans to create worlds by naming the animals in creation. Names create character and define life. In the ancient world, to name something was to have the power to define its character. Words were understood to have power to create worlds.

We know the same power. You know how easy it is for a person to get a bad name. I have seen people destroyed by the names that other people have used to define them. If you call your children "bad" and "evil" and "trouble," your children will live up to the names you give them. If you name a church "hypocrites" or "lazy and uncommitted," a church will live up to its name.

Our actions are determined by how we see the world. If you watch the news and listen to the words that people use to define the world, you will be afraid to go out at night. On some local newscasts, the first ten minutes are filled with murders, child abuse, and accidents. In a city of a million, there are tragedies; there are murders and struggles. But if the only world you know is the one created by the words and images you see on some newscasts, you will live in a frightening world. When you hear news of violence in certain parts of the city, you will not go there for fear for your life.

The world we live in is literally created by the words we speak or the words we read. We will not live in parts of the world which feel threatening to us.

## **BREATHING PEACE**

God not only spoke form and order into the chaos, but God animated life with breath. God inspired – inspirited – life. God took what had been named and created presence with divine breath.

This is done by empathetic connection. God put a part of the divine self into the creatures that were formed from the chaos. This is not an insignificant understanding of life. The way God creates order and life and relationship is by co-mingling reality. Oneness between human and divine is the result of God's pouring the divine self into the created reality.

We know that words also inspire. We have heard words of encouragement – empowerment for the heart – and we have found new life. I remember a conversation I had with my son when I was feeling uncertain about the decision to move from parish ministry to the academy. His words over coffee filled me with the courage I needed to take the next step and do it. As I have done ministry in the classroom at CTS, colleagues have spoken words of encouragement that have inspired me – breathing new life into me when I didn't have the energy to keep on.

Words are powerful because they create form and order and structure. We gain insight into who we are in relationship to who others are. We know boundaries and rights and rules for living. Words are powerful because they inspire and create energy in living.

## **REDUCING ANXIETY**

God also speaks with a word which reduces anxiety. Anxiety often creates fear. Fear creates anger, and anger an attack. But the divine word speaks a word of steadfast love. God is with us, even in

the midst of the fear and anxiety of shaking foundations. God speaks words which hold us and assure us.

And we know the power of those words. When I get on an airplane, it matters to me that the host and the pilot speak in calm and soothing words. They are the ones who set the acid level in my stomach. If they speak in ritualistic words about what I am supposed to do and how we are going to get to the next city and when we are going to get there and whether or not the flight will be smooth or rough, it makes all the difference in the peace I feel inside. My internal conflict is reduced significantly by the ritual of words spoken that assure me that someone has things under control.

## **CHURCH IMITATES GOD**

The church takes its life from God. And our business is divine business.

The church is in the word business. We proclaim a God who creates with a word and a God who speaks to re-create with a word made flesh. This is a critical theological understanding which shapes the importance of what *you* do in this congregation. Words create form and structure and so we preach the words which create the world as God intended it to be.

We speak words which define form and relationships. For example, through our story we know that God creates people different from each other. There was a time when we all spoke the same language, but, according to our story, we became proud and thought that we were God. So our language was confused. There are now insiders and outsiders – family members and strangers – people of the hood and sojourners.

The temptation in such a world is to give those distinctions ultimate significance. We are tempted to see insiders as safe and outsiders as threats. We make virtues of the values of those like us and we define as evil the values of those who are strangers. And the more we can keep them strange, the more we can emphasize the

difference; the more justified we are in either isolating ourselves from them or developing ways to destroy them.

But the story by which we live in the church creates a Judeo-Christian shaped memory. In that story these distinctions are not ultimate, but strangers are to be welcomed because they may be “angels unawares” or they may even indeed be the Christ of God. When Jesus told his disciples to care for the least of these, he said, they were caring for him. When he met them after his resurrection, he was a stranger to them. They only recognized him as their Lord when they ate with him – when they sat with him – when they dared to open their table to the stranger.

The language we use to create our world in the church is one which defines a stranger as a sister, the beggar as a brother. In the preaching of the word of God, we structure the world in such a way as to define the stranger as our neighbor, and therefore must be cared for with the same love that we would care for a member of our own family or tribe.

The church lives God’s agenda not only by speaking words which order existence so that people live in peace, but we also join God in breathing life into the forms we create by naming them. We are not only in the business of speaking, but acting. Acting is word becoming flesh. Acting is the pouring of our very breath into the forms we believe to be peace form. God breathed the very divine self into the mud of existence. So too we take those structures we create for community and we give our life to them.

That is what animates a church. That is what spirits a church. It is the people who give themselves to the community of peace with their very breath and energy. It is spirited when people speak words of empowerment and put themselves beside others to support them in that living.

## **PRACTICING REGULAR RITUAL OF PEACEMAKING**

What we do each week then is to create a ritual of worship which rehearses this theological understanding of God’s work in the

world. Worship is literally an exercise session. It is where we practice what it means to be Christian. We practice peace making.

Christian ritual of worship is like story telling. The other day, I went into the book store and as I was waiting for the clerk to find the book I was seeking, I wandered over by the children's section. There we were on a Saturday morning. Parents were sitting in bean-bag chairs with little tots on their lap, reading stories. And I realized that the ritual of worship is the lap of the divine that holds us while someone tells us the classic stories of life. Parents can tell the scary stories of the big bad wolf and the wicked witch and on the lap of security, the child can face those fears. Practicing the story over and over in the safety of a parental lap builds confidence so that when the child goes out into the real world with bad wolves and wicked witches, she knows that she can handle the situation.

You see, God made us to live as a part of the divine reality – knowing that we are spirited by divine breath. But we humans came to believe that the life we lived was our own and that we could organize it and inspirit it without the divine life. We took what was a gift and claimed it as our own to do with as we please. We have taken what was given to all (divine breath) and claimed the right to determine who should have it and who should be denied it. We have determined that some can be God's children and some cannot.

Most of us recognize that we have messed things up by trying to play God, so we come to worship each week to admit that we are not sure how to recreate peace between God's creatures. We come to confess and to remember and to rehearse a way God set out for us.

This is one of the critical reasons that children ought to be in worship each week. Just as you teach them the practices of safety and manners from the age before they can comprehend, so to you teach them to practice the ritual of God's drama of peacemaking before they even understand what they are doing.

## GATHERING WITH STRANGERS

We engage in God's peacemaking drama. The drama we rehearse in our worship begins with the first act – the great processional of all people gathering at the mountain of God.

When we gather for worship each week with strangers, we do it because of the world we have created in congregations – a world created by a word we claim is from God. By telling the stories of the Bible, we build an understanding of peace-making that is not grounded in fight or flight, but in community. God made peace by becoming one with the human community which was working against the divine will. Rather than hiding in the divine realm, God chose to nest with us. God made peace with humanity by risking life itself to love those who didn't want that love. The holy one made peace with the stranger by an act of self-sacrificing love.

The classic act of worship begins with the gathering. In the Middle Ages, the priests would go out around the city and begin the processional in the neighborhoods. They would begin walking and singing and the people would come out of their homes and process with them, singing praises to God. They came to the cathedral from all over – rich and poor, intellectual and ignorant, powerful and weak – they would come together and gather, as if they were gathering on the mountain of God. All nations are welcomed to the table prepared with enough for all.

When we gather for worship with all these people from all over this city; when we welcome those who do not know who the Disciples of Christ are – or even those seekers who do not know what the Christian faith is all about – when we open ourselves to know and care for them as if they were one of our family, we are engaging in peace-making the way God did it.

We are sharing the mountain of the Lord of hosts revealed in the mind of the prophet Isaiah.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is

cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth. (25:6-9)

## **GATHERING TO WORSHIP GOD**

It is important to see that we gather around the act of worship of God. We live in what some people call a culture of intimacy. There is an assumption that the way we live well with each other is to know as much as we can about each other. We are fascinated with the lives of the celebrities. We love to know the intimate details of the rich and powerful. We believe salvation is intimate knowledge of the other.

But Patrick Keifert, in his book, *Welcoming the Stranger*, reminds us that the church is not an intimate community of people who know all about each other. Rather, he suggests that it is a community of strangers who have become one by the power of their common worship of the one God. What has created this community is not that we are all such nice people that others would be crazy not to want to be here with us. What created this community of Vine Street Christian Church and what has sustained it with new strangers and friends through its almost 180 years is that we have all come together to worship God. As I visit around different churches in my new role as a professor, I have discovered that I feel much more at home where people are focused on worship of God rather than on getting to know me.

The first act of peace-making in which God engaged with humanity and we engage with this world is to gather with strangers – gather with the ones we fear and the ones we have defined as outsiders.

## TOGETHER TO LISTEN

The second act of the divine peace making drama is listening. God came among us and heard human pain. The human divine encounter throughout our biblical story is one of a God who dares to listen to humans. This empathetic ear is one of the unique characteristics of the Hebrew-Christian God. Some of the gods of the ancient worlds were powerful and aloof – unaffected by the mundane of creation. This image of the divine has infected some Christians, too. Some believe God to be one who is distant and unchanging and unaffected by the pain and suffering in the rest of the cosmos. Not so. God is one who has such a desire to know creation; that prophets are present to suffer with the people, and Jesus is present to hear and respond to human pain.

In the classic worship tradition, we always have a time of listening. We listen to the scriptures, the stories of how God worked with humanity in the past. We listen to the struggles humans have had to be faithful to a God who loved the strangers. We listen to how God was so moved by human pride and sin that even divine death was not out of the question. We listen to a love that was so profound that it had to know flesh as we know it that it might redeem it.

And that listening wasn't simply to the memory, but also to the struggle with God's presence in the present. That is what preaching is all about. It is speaking words which seek to present God's word in Jesus in such a way that we who are living in this time might recognize God's word in our world. Preaching is the witness to the power of word to create a world in which God's *shalom* might be experienced today.

We hear God at work by listening to each other. The world has an image of the church as preaching. But, the fundamental act of Christian witness is to listen – listen to the other and how the other experiences life and wrestles with divine issues. The arrogance we have that assumes that *our* answers are *the* answers blocks our capacity to be open to divine answers which come in different shapes and colors and cultures.

## **PREACHING GROUNDED IN LISTENING**

I believe that preaching has the power to create a presence of peace in the human community. I believe that it can help a chaotic soul become centered. I believe that people who are living in fear and chaos long for a presence that assures mercy and love. But, it must be words spoken from the posture of a cocked ear which leans into the space between us and the other creatures on this planet. It must be words which come from listening for the divine in the places of life which seem devoid of the divine presence.

I have heard such preaching. Barbara Brown Taylor spoke at Chautauqua last summer. Barbara is an Episcopal priest who lives in Clarksville, Georgia. As she spoke each morning in the outdoor amphitheater, I was drawn into her words. In visiting with her, she asked me what it was about her preaching I found helpful. In thinking, it came to me that she was so thoughtful and careful in her speaking of the words that I felt free to move toward them. Her respect for the words she spoke helped me know that she would respect the words which formed my world.

Preaching which cares for language and speaks mercifully of mercy, speaks lovingly of love, whispers graciously of grace that will sooth a shattered heart and help that heart speak words of healing within itself.

## **BAD PREACHING**

Knowing this makes some preaching not just bad, but blasphemous. I have discovered that some preaching is sheer abuse. Abusive relationships with words of acceptance and love. A person speaks kindly to you and opens you up. He then strikes you with a cutting and brutal blow – a word or fist. You retreat into your lonely space; your soul curled up like a fetus inside you. He speaks of mercy and pardon again and over time you finally come out of yourself – just about the time your arm drops from around your wounded heart, he strikes again.

I have observed Christian worship like this. I have seen preachers who invite you to join the community – to confess and receive the forgiving mercy of a loving God. There are all kinds of warm and friendly faces who assure you that you can come as you are. And then the preaching attacks and wounds. The words from the pulpit do not bring a presence of peace to frightened Disciples in an upper room, but they are accusatory and blaming. Preachers often abuse their privilege and shame others into believing that God’s peace can come from people feeling guilty enough to do certain things the preacher believes are virtues.

Christian preaching is proclaiming the presence of a God whose mercy swallows sin, whose love erases fear, whose grace fills the empty spaces of confusion. It is speaking those words which not only help a person come out of their closet of fear, but help a community welcome them with open arms. It is introducing people to a God who listens to their pain and responds to it by sharing it with them. And it is creating a community of people who know that the ear is more powerful than the tongue. The person who has the capacity to use her ear to create space for the other to speak words is the most powerful person in the world. If you think about it, we are all invited to speak ourselves into existence and to name who we are and what life is for us. The greatest gift we can give another is to create a gracefilled space in which they may speak what they know inside and create a world of new awareness and self-understanding.

That is what was created here when Vine Street started the Pastoral Counseling Center. It was the belief that God is one who listens to the pain of others and in listening in a safe place where one is not condemned or attacked, creating a space in which others might speak new life into existence. A counselor is one who knows how to listen with that same empathetic ear that God has for humans.

By listening we engage in the second act of Christian peace-making. We recognize in the other the divine which is being called out and welcomed into life. We who have been heard when we had nothing to say listen to those who feel they have nothing to say. And the words come out of them and reshape who they are becoming. The Christian pulpit is one with big ears and a gentle tongue.

## **MAKING AN OFFERING**

The third act of divine peacemaking was that of making an offering. When we worship each week, we practice the art of Christian peacemaking. We do as God did. We gather with those who are other than us, we listen together to God's activity with our forebearers and with our world today, and we then make ourselves as an offering by bringing our money which represents our lives broken into activity. We bring bread and wine which represent the work of our hands to produce life.

We do this because that is what God did. God made the divine offering for the world in Jesus of Nazareth. God was poured out in flesh. Jesus was not one who simply spoke words to help people understand how God was at work in the world, but Jesus was the Word which helped people know the divine presence in the world. And Jesus gave himself – broken – to the world. That is the way Jesus lived. A world cried out for mercy and he gave himself to offer that mercy.

And it is our faith that when Jesus did that, God acted to redeem that which was broken. The resurrection is the doctrine which declares our belief that God takes broken lives given in love and makes them whole – redeems them and makes new life out of that brokenness. That is what salvation is. It is wholeness. It is the act of God who is merciful.

This is who we are as Christians. It is people who, pouring ourselves out, bring our broken and tired selves to a table with stories of how God took a mortally wounded and broken man and raised him to new life to bless the world. We tell that story over and over with great thanksgiving because it is our hope that even our pain and even our suffering has redemptive possibilities. God acted in this cross of Jesus to bring peace between the human and the divine realm. If God has done that in Jesus, then our faith is that God can do it with our broken and wounded pain.

This is a critical piece of Christian peace making which is important. The Christian community is not afraid of pain and alienation. You do not have to dress up your wounds and cover them over

to come to the community of faith. That broken struggle of each human life is not just welcomed, but accepted. It is expected that you bring yourself to the table each week. When you sit in the silence of the Lord's supper and the pain of loss wells up in your eyes and drains down your cheek in pools of tears, you are being healed by the one who knows that pain as deeply as do you. We consciously remember (re-member) the divine pains and discover healing for our own.

The Christian community is one who knows that peace doesn't come from avoidance or exorcism, but it comes from an honest encounter with the deep reality of human life in all its pain. It comes from bringing that into the presence of a God whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

And when we take the bread and the wine we receive broken and poured out life as a sign of life and hope for ourselves and for our world. We receive the energy, which comes from tasting healing.

## **DEPARTING TO LIVE**

Departing – when God acted in Jesus and was separated through the resurrection and ascension, the spirit came to recreate and expand the community of peace. Death did not decrease the power of God's activity in the world, but somehow it expanded it. The spirit came among them and created a group of people whose cultural and language differences didn't divide, but empowered. The story of Pentecost is one in which people who were strangers discovered that they were at peace with each other and that they could work together even when they didn't have the same background or the same cultural values. It was the powerful presence of a word of mercy and forgiveness that healed the broken world.

Our worship is not complete until we depart and are scattered with this kind of spirit which is not afraid of the strangers but who knows that strangers can work together for the common good. The act of worship includes the living of life in a way that the world is

blessed with the healing we know in our gathering, our listening and remembering.

That is why Vine Street and all communities of faith work with broken people in the world. That is why you offer a home in the winter to the homeless. It isn't an extraneous act of altruism, but it is at the very core of your worship life. That is why you leave this place and scatter in this community holding the hand of the sick and sheltering the battered. Not because you are "good," but because you are worshipping the God whose very life is making things whole. That is why you participate with the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, both of which were passions of Dr. Nooe. Not because you can achieve the kingdom of God by hard work, but because as people who have been healed by gathering with strangers around the table of Christ, you must share it with those you know are longing for such peace. You lobby your legislators to create a society in which children have enough food and education and protection, not because you are kind, which you are, but because you worship a peacemaking God who gave the divine self for the least of these. Working for justice is not an option for the Christian Church. It is at the very core of our worship of the peacemaking God we honor each week.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are people of the word. We speak words to remember God's peacemaking activities of the past, words which create a vision of God's peacemaking agenda for the future, and words which communicate the presence of divine peace for the soul in the present. The ritual of worship is the context in which these words are spoken and the peacemaking of God is practiced and experienced.

This community's exercise in peacemaking gives us something to give to the world. It is unique and it is in the bones of the body of Christ. We do not live with some utopian notion that we shall all become the same and learn to like each other. The peacemaking we learn by worshipping God isn't one which demands

that we like each other in the church or at the table. When the lamb and the lion lie down together, they remain the lamb and the lion.

What is important about this peacemaking activity we call preaching and worship is that it is the only way to make peace in the real world. Until people get together on the mountain of plenty – believing that God creates enough for all when shared by all – we won't know peace. Until people gather and listen to each other and know God in the depth of the stranger, we will not know peace. Until people learn the language of mercy, there will be no peace. Until we word our world in such a way that all are seen as loved by the divine, there will be no peace. Until some people are willing to make themselves as an offering to be broken for others, we will not know peace. Until some receive enough of this transforming food of God's healing love and depart to share that mercy with others, there will not be peace. There may be cessation of conflict – there may be reduced killing – but there will not be peace.