

**Do We Really Believe in Peace?**  
*Romans 12:1-2, 14-21, Matthew 5:43-48*

Advent begins in three weeks. We will open our services then as we traditionally do with the lighting of a candle. Each of the four candles has meaning.

In one family (not in this congregation), a parent asked the children: "Who can tell me what the four candles in the Advent wreath represent?" The seven-year-old exuberantly began: "There's love, joy, peace and ... and ..." Eager to keep up, the six-year-old excitedly broke in: "I know! I know! Peace and quiet!"

If I asked the question "Do you believe in peace?" we would all probably say "Yes, of course." Do we even have to ask such a question when we already know the answer? Everyone wants peace. And everyone believes that real peace would be an unparalleled blessing for the entire Earth.

But if I asked "Do you believe peace is possible and war can be abolished?" many of us might be more inclined to say no rather than yes. And we would certainly be excused for having our doubts.

Conflict is a part of life. Conflict is a part of human history. A study reported in *The Canadian Army Journal* regarding the frequency of human conflicts came up with some intriguing statistics. Since 3600 BC, the world has only known 292 years of peace. Since 3600 BC, there have been 14,531 wars, large and small, in which more than 3.5 billion people have been killed.

Someone else has calculated that between 1500 BC and AD 1860 – approximately 3,300 years -- more than 8,000 peace treaties to put an end to war have been signed. They lasted an average of two years each. We might well be excused for having our doubts about the possibility of peace.

Our doubts about peace might deepen even further if I said I wanted to talk about genuine peace this morning -- not merely ceasefire agreements or pauses in a conflict for one reason or another. Martin Luther King Jr. defined it well when he said: "True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force, tension or war; it is the presence of some positive force, justice, goodwill, brotherhood." [Quoted in *Current Policy*, No. 857, U.S. Dept. of State Bureau of Public Affairs.] Genuine peace is the removal of those underlying conditions of injustice and exploitation that fan the flames of resentment and that finally lead to war.

Gerry Adams has been president of Sinn Fein in Ireland since 1983. Whatever people think about Adams and Sinn Fein, it is fair to say he wants peace in Ireland. And he is part of the ongoing Irish peace process. On Michael Coren's television program this week, Coren interviewed Adams for an hour. I heard something in their conversation similar to Martin Luther King Jr's sentiment. For peace to have a chance, there must be more than the absence of conflict. There must be something positive – some constructive alternative direction for good – for the possibility of peace to happen.

Let's get personal for a moment. Think about the peace (or not) in Canadian homes and families. Parents and children or husbands and wives may stop yelling at one another in various ways. They may maintain a facade of pleasantness even as resentment burns inside. Or they may give each other the "cold shoulder," speaking only when absolutely necessary. Although conflict is not raging, they never really talk about the underlying issues that divide them. Some families go on like this for months or even years. We might say they are observing a "truce" in that at least they are not fighting anymore. But we would not likely say "genuine peace" has come into their lives.

There is a similarity among nations, I think. For instance, in Lebanon and Gaza and the West Bank and in Israel, conflicts are eventually followed by ceasefires. But there is never any real peace in the Middle East because fundamental issues of land and justice remain unresolved. We would not be off the mark if we referred to Iraq or Afghanistan as well -- or any nation where conflict is ongoing or even brewing just below the surface. So what we are talking about this morning is not only the *absence* of open conflict but also the *presence* of respect and understanding and even love between enemies so that the causes of war are removed. Yet we might be especially doubtful about the possibility of peace.

Former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was quoted in the September 13, 1993, issue of *Newsweek* as saying: "Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies." Ironically, he was assassinated in 1995 at a rally in support of the peace process attended by more than 100,000 Israelis in Tel Aviv.

In the face of all these reasons for doubt about the possibility of peace on Earth, our Scriptures this morning may seem difficult to hear, appear easier said than done and feel more idealistic than practical. In Mathew's Gospel (5:44), Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In Romans 12:18, the Apostle Paul told his readers: "Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody." If we are honest with ourselves, none of that is easy. And many of us have sincere doubts about even our desire to act in a peaceful way let alone be able to love someone who is out make our lives miserable.

Let me tell you what I believe makes loving our enemies possible, what makes praying for those who harass us possible and what makes it possible for us even to come close to being people of peace.

When we lit the Christ candle this morning, we made two startling claims. I wonder if we hear them so often they seem more ho-hum than startling. The first claim: "Jesus Christ is the light of the world." In a world that knows the darkness of war, we who follow Jesus declare that Jesus Christ brings the light of love and hope and justice to disperse the darkness of conflict everywhere in the world. The second claim: "Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace." In a world that knows constant conflict, we also claim that Jesus Christ is the peace people are looking for -- in their lives and for their relationships -- whether personal or national.

My friends, these are astonishing claims! Yet they can counter our doubts and offer the real possibility for you and for me to achieve genuine peace that is not merely the absence of tension but also the presence of peace, respect, justice, understanding and even love.

In Ephesians 2:14, there is a clear statement that this presence of peace is accessible to all human beings. The declaration is remarkably personal: Jesus Christ is our peace.

“For Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people. With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies.”

Jesus Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us and reconciled us to one another, making us one.

Twenty years ago tomorrow, humanity will celebrate a small glimpse into the unifying hope and promise extended to a divided nation with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. The other day I watched some television coverage of the incredible joy people on both sides of the border felt then with the wall's destruction. Their joy and coming together with family and friends then is a mere hint of the joy and coming together of human beings with God because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But our coming together with God holds true promise that will not ever be disappointed.

In the New Testament, the word for peace means “to reconcile or join.” When Bible translators translate the Bible, they want to find the most accurate word to translate a particular biblical concept into the language they are working with. In one particular tribal language, they discovered the combination of words that captured the idea of peace was “a heart that sits down.” I like that wording! When the heart sits down with Jesus -- when we join with God through Jesus Christ -- there is peace!

Peace was a consistent theme throughout Jesus' life. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the angels said he came to bring peace with God. When the prophet Isaiah prophesied his birth, he called him the Prince of Peace. During his lifetime, Jesus preached peace to everyone who would listen and hear him. But Jesus' desire for us to be people of peace was not built on emotion or sentiment or some wish-fulfilment. Our experience of peace and our ability to be peacemakers begins with Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of sin – forgiveness for both our sins and the sins of others, even our enemies. And because we can have peace with God and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, so Jesus calls us to be children of God and love those who are enemies, pray for enemies (for their good, of course!) and find good ways to make peace with those who are our enemies. And praying for our enemies is a good way to begin the peace process because it is difficult to be at war personally with those for whom we pray. Jesus Christ is our source of peace – giving us what we could never gain on our own and helping us to be people of peace, which we could not be on our own.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul understood the difficulty of telling his readers how a follower of Jesus Christ ought to live or behave. Listen again to what Paul said:

“Ask God to bless those who persecute you -- yes, ask him to bless, not to curse. Be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep. Have the same concern for everyone. Do not be proud, but accept humble duties. Do not think of yourselves as wise.

If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good. Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody. Never take revenge, my friends.”

Because Paul understood that this kind of loving others is easier said than done, he began Chapter 12 by appealing to the Christians in Rome to let God transform them inwardly by a complete change of their mind toward God and to Jesus’ purposes for them. In fact, true worship of God means to offer ourselves completely and without reserve to God through Jesus Christ. With that foundation, we have the real possibility to be people of peace with one another in the church, in our families, with our neighbours and perhaps even with the world.

Does this seem too simple to you? Maybe it would help to hear a “hard-headed” military man with a similar message. General Omar Bradley was an honoured and decorated American soldier during the Second World War. This is what he said on Armistice Day in 1948 about the problems of peace:

“With the monstrous weapons [human beings] already have, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescence. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have too many [people] of science and too few [people] of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. [Humanity] is stumbling blindly through spiritual darkness while toying with precarious secrets of life and death.

“The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace; more about killing than we know about living.”

Jesus Christ is both the Light of the World and the Prince of Peace. And we declare that our hope rests in God, who is present in the world through the Spirit of Jesus -- the One who is our peace.

Do we believe in peace? That’s the question for us to answer this Remembrance Day.

If we would honour the soldiers who have fought and died in all the wars in this century, we will say: “Yes, we believe in peace. They did not fight and die in vain.”

If we would honour the future of our children and our children’s children who depend on us for the world we will give them, we will say: “Yes, we believe in peace. We will not rob our children of peace by senseless wars and violence, as far as it in us to do so.”

Let us then give ourselves today and every day to Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection from the dead for the entire world give each of us the reason to do our part in the work for peace, both in our relationships and in our world.

Peace is possible. Peace is already real through God who loved us and through him who died for us and rose from the dead – even Jesus Christ. Let us work for the good of all and pray for peace in our world and in our lives.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller  
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