

All is Calm

17 December 2006

Bible passages:

Matthew 5:9 (*The Message*)

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

Luke 2:14 (*New Living Translation*)

“At once, the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises:

‘Glory to God in the heavenly heights,

‘Peace to all men and women on earth who please God.’”

Sermon nugget:

We talked two weeks ago about how to find inner peace in the midst of this busy season. Now we will think about how peace in our lives can contribute to a truly peaceful world.

A couple of weeks ago, when our theme was “Silent Night,” we talked about the importance of trying to find and maintain a sense of inner peace amid the hectic pace of this holiday season. I hope some of that has been helpful as we move right along in our trek toward Christmas itself.

If you were here, you might remember that I shared something that someone else suggested about how to start our day with a little exercise that consists of setting our priorities and creating breathing room for re-centering breaks. The exercise, called “Morning Intent,” involves posing three questions of ourselves before the day’s hectic pace envelopes us. Those three questions are: (1) **What kind of person do we want to be today?** (2) **What meaningful things do we want to accomplish?** (3) **Where can we make a difference in someone’s life?**

I wonder how you and I have done in stopping long enough to ask ourselves those questions at the beginning of each day. I have to admit that I’ve been trying to do that, and have done it several times, but unfortunately, not every single day.

My hunch is that things would go a lot better for me and for us internally if we worked on remembering that, and not just at Christmas, but every day. Part of the reason I think that’s so important is that those questions have a way of re-centering us. If we start our day with even just a few moments of silence, we can discover a sense of peace within that will offer us refuge and calm all day long.

And there’s something else that happens, too, when we are centered and at peace: that sense of calm gets communicated to others just by the way we are. Think about it a minute. You and I both know just how toxic it can be when someone we’re close to is nervous or

unsettled. We often get a pit in our stomach, and we become anxious just because someone we care for is anxious.

Well, I’m convinced that the opposite is true, too. When we are calm, even in the midst of a crazy time that gets communicated to others. They can feel it by our demeanor and the quiet ways in which we move and talk. We can create a sense of calmness in our homes, our workplaces, wherever we go. And if we can all do that on our limited terrain, I’m guessing that the circle might grow larger and larger to encompass our circle of friends, our co-workers, our community, maybe even our world. Thomas a Kempis once wrote, **“Be at peace with yourself first and then you will be able to bring peace to others.”**

It’s interesting how our first Bible passage for today starts with our individual actions and then comments on how our thoughts and deeds trickle outward. This single verse from the gospel of Matthew reads this way: **“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”**

This is one of the verses from what is called the Beatitudes, and it typically says something along the lines of “blessed are the peacemakers.” That has a way of sounding rather grandiose, which is why I like our version from *The Message*. It begins with our own actions, and translates to others when it says, **“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight.”** Working together toward a common goal, rather than against someone to get there first can make a real difference.

Avoiding a fight and finding a different way to settle differences might help us all. In fact, I read about a school program in California that is working to turn schoolyard bullies into cooperative caring students. The program is called Peace Builders, and was created by psychologist Dennis Embry.

The program actually teaches kids how to talk through conflicts and walk away from fights, but probably the most important feature of this program is that it encourages both students and teachers to look for the good in one another, instead of always criticizing and harping on the negative. They are trained to look for and encourage positive behavior in one another, things like playing fair and showing common courtesy to others, and students who demonstrate that kind of behavior receive notes of praise for their accomplishments. In places where Peace Builders has been initiated, it has worked as rates of fighting, suspensions and absenteeism have dropped dramatically.

That may seem like a trivial thing, but it has to start with someone, and there’s not a better place to start than with

ourselves. We can learn peaceful ways of dealing with one another, and instead of fighting or conflict, we can affirm the positive interactions, and typically. Remember, it all depends on which behavior we feed: the positive, peaceful interactions or the negative. When we affirm the positive, we will, I think, find more of it.

I realize that what I'm about to say may not be popular or well received, but I still feel as though I have to say it. I wonder how different our world would be today if we had responded differently than we did to 9/11. That's exactly what I found myself thinking on the fifth anniversary of that horrible day. Would the world have been more peaceful and less divided if we had tried to narrow the gap between our varying ideologies and religions? I don't know, but I like to think that it might have been. Frankly, I've never been much in favor of war, and I realize that there are times it is warranted, but my sense is that we got off track somewhat and got to revenge, bypassing justice.

William Sloane Coffin was the esteemed pastor of Riverside Church in New York City for a number of years, and although now retired, he has recently written a little book entitled *Letters to a Young Doubter*. In it, he imagines corresponding with a college freshman in an almost lost mode—the letter, and responding to the young person questions about life, faith and the world.

In one of those letters, he shares a time when he himself was 18, and eager to fight and eliminate Adolph Hitler. In retrospect, he writes, “Never did it occur to me that fighting fire with fire might produce only more ashes.” If we stop to think about it, it's interesting how violence tends to spawn more violence, abuse more abuse, foul language more foul language. It seems to me that if we choose to live a peaceful existence, we refrain from those things that create more violence, abuse, disgust, and we live lives that are more loving toward others. We fight fire with a different approach.

Recently, Tom Ehrich wrote an article about peace, and he was mostly referring to the intolerance and polarization that seem to be permeating our world today. In the article, he is urging a more centered approach, and in fact, the headline to the column was “Peace lies in the common-sense center.”

I'd like to share some of his comments about being centered in the common-sense center. For instance, he says, “Certainty doesn't bully questions into silence, and the questioning don't think themselves superior to those seeking certainty.” He writes, “In the center, those with power restrain their use of it, and those who lack power seek justice with ballots, not bullets.”

Furthermore, Ehrich says, “In the center, compromise is valued as essential to democracy, and not dismissed as ‘wishy-washy,’” and “belief in God is valued as a call to

humility and servanthood.” When centered, he writes, “Persons matter more than opinions,” and “diversity is recognized as inevitable, and if not valued or understood, at least is allowed.”

You may not agree with me, but I think that, if we are centered ourselves, and experience an inner peace, the kinds of behavior that Ehrich is talking about will flow through us and from us out toward others. And, if my sense is really true, we can yet experience a world that is calm and peaceful and the words of the angelic choir will ring out loud and clear:

‘Glory to God in the heavenly heights,

‘Peace to all men and women on earth who please God.”

CLOSING:

A sparrow asked a wild dove, “Tell me the weight of a snowflake.” “Nothing more than nothing was the answer.”

‘In that case, “said the sparrow, “I must tell you a marvelous story. I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow—not heavily, not in a raging blizzard—no, just like in a dream, without a sound, and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3, 741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch, nothing more than nothing, as you say, the branch broke off.”

Having said that the sparrow flew away. The dove thought about the story for a while, and then said to herself, “Perhaps only one person's voice is lacking for peace to come to the world.”

So I ask you, is that one voice yours, mine? Is it within each of us to help the world know that “All is Calm?”

Have a good Sunday, go Colts, and go in peace. Amen.