



Disciples Peace Fellowship Peace Sunday Resources for 2013:

In Two Sections: A Reflection by Jon Berquist and Liturgical Resources (in English and Spanish) by Linda McCrae and Ian McCrae (Shared from an earlier publication of resources by DPF)

Proclaiming Peace
A Reflection for Peace Sunday 2013

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Preaching peace in these days is an act of courage. It involves a willingness to imagine a world that our eyes cannot see, at least not while we are reading the newspaper or scanning web pages. We face a world that has known the cost of violence in this past year, from Sandy Hook to Syria. The US Congress and the UN Security Council alike debate whether an attack should be imminent, while Syrians mourn a hundred thousand deaths and perhaps one and a half million refugees have fled their country, with millions more internally displaced.

For Christians, preaching peace must begin with realism. We need to proclaim the stark realities around us, in this broken world. I believe that our media-rich context makes it harder to come to realism; we have so much information but too little insight. In these weeks as Syria dominates headlines of international news, the media distractions have pointed us to the military capacities of the United States, the differences within the United Nations, and the questions about the accuracy of military intelligence concerning the location of chemical weapons. Meanwhile, other headlines have drawn attention to the diplomatic aspects, as the United States, Syria, and

Russia have all made public statements and conducted private meetings with allies and other interested parties. The media saturation shifts our attention to the powerful and famous, to those who manipulate war for their political benefit, and to leaders who are rarely exposed directly to the atrocities of war. But the reality of war and threats of war are so often missing from this discussion. In our pulpits and all of our Christian discussion, we need to bring forward the plight and the voices of the victims, the bereaved, the refugees, the displaced, the threatened, and the fearful. We have seen every day the pictures of world leaders; we need to focus our eyes on the refugee camps, the families coping the loss, and the lines of fleeing people. From our pulpits, we need to show people the reality of the violence and war – without sanitizing or glorifying it.

Most of all, we need to proclaim the realities of war without losing the hope of peace. If we are true to scripture, if we are convinced of the truth of God, if we believe in peace as God's call and God's intention for humanity, then we must maintain at all times our utter certainty of this: God's peace is more powerful than human war. Despite the reality that we live in the historical midst of tumultuous war, God assures us that peace will succeed whereas war will fail. In the long run, peace is more real, more persuasive, more formidable, and more compelling than war can ever pretend to be.

But it is easy for us to lose hope. The reason for hope seem too elusive, drowned out by the din of public media that thrive off the noise of fearful uncertainty about the future. The hopeful visions of our faith can be lost in the glare of our screens and their flickering transitory images. Our faith endures in ancient truths, proclaimed once and echoing throughout the ages, not in the affairs of the moment's current events and chased by a media that trades in repetition and escalation. Our preaching must drive home these ancient certainties, allowing God's truth to be heard over the commotion of headlines. God's truth must not be reduced to catchy refrains or

repeated buzzwords. We cannot overcome fear-mongering with slogans. The power of Christian hope does not reside in its brevity, but rather in hope's longevity. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the long moral arc that moves us all ever closer to justice. King paraphrased Theodore Parker, the abolitionist and Boston minister who preached, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."¹ This is a word of hope. The moral arc of justice and peace is not quick; its rhythms and utterances are not catchy. The moral arc is a slow process of historical unfolding of divine will that will bring us to justice. Such is the character of peace – a gradual unveiling of what God has intended since the beginning. And every inch of this unveiling of God's peace is a moment, a glimpse of hope in the real world.

Preachers of peace need to be positive, to lead us into hope. It is not enough to be realistic and to remind us of the horrors of violent life all around us. When people have hope, justice is at hand. As Job reminds us: "the poor have hope and injustice shuts its mouth" (5:16). Hope silences injustice; hope lays the foundation for the proper proclamation of justice and peace. Hope and realism, after all, go together. If God is the most real part of existence, then a realistic view of any situation leads to hope in God's character and activity, as well as God's long-acting justice. When we look at the most desperate of situations in world crises, a realistic examination will uncover not only the extent of human suffering but the immensity of God's compassion. God's love overwhelms us all, not ignoring or obscuring the suffering, but wiping away the tears and setting up the conditions for new life.

¹ Theodore Parker, "Of Justice and the Conscience," in *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Boston: Crosby Nichols, 1853), pp. 84-85.

With realism and hope as building blocks, we can begin to construct a life that will lead toward God's peace. A life of peace requires courage. In this world when peacemakers are too often the recipients of scorn and mockery rather than admiration, a voice for peace must be courageous. The proclamation of peace cannot afford to be anything but bold. Our preaching for peace needs to recognize that God is on the side of peace, bending the arc toward justice and working audaciously in the midst of every conflict. Peace requires courage, audacity, and passion. Courage is, after all, a matter of *heart* – *corazón, coeur, kardia*. Courage leads to encouragement, because heart spreads to others who are encouraged by our acts of courage. But courage is not enough to lead toward peace; after all, battlefields are full of people of courage.

Besides heart, we need imagination. A God-given imagination allows us to see through the despair of this world's mess and to peer beyond the present day to the future that God has in store. With vision granted by that kind of imagination, we can begin to see what we can do to start walking in God's peace. This is all the more important in these days, when the media treats conflict like a cliff-hanger, depicting no-win, no-way-out scenarios to keep us guessing and to keep us watching for what comes next. Imagination gives us vision to see our way out of these no-win dead-ends, so that we can envision a course of action. We know that Christianity is most effective when we present clear plans for practical steps that people can take as part of God's reign, and this is true for our actions toward justice and peace. We need to believe that God will bend the moral universe toward justice and peace – but we also need to know how to bend our own steps in that same direction.

Thus, peace requires us to make a change. Our own walk in life bends in response to God's call. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'" (Isaiah 52:7).

We must learn how to be that kind of messenger, if we are to announce peace in our own world. First, our own feet must respond, by walking in new paths. We follow the steps of our Lord who reigns and rules in a different way than the rulers of this world. Our minds turn from the actions of worldly leaders to the activity of God who reigns in our midst. We begin to envision a path that leads not to war, but to the good news that the world needs to hear. We listen to those words of salvation that come when we follow God who guides and reigns. Our lives change, and we walk in new paths, as messengers of peace.

In all of this, I am reminded of Psalm 85.² We often turn right to the end of that Psalm, with its evocative image that righteousness and peace kiss each other (v. 10). But I believe that all of this Psalm is instructive for us, because of how it shows a process of peace, and may even teach us something about how God understands peace. The Psalm begins with praise and remembrance of what God has done for the people:

Psa. 85:1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;
 you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
Psa. 85:2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
 you pardoned all their sin. *Selah*
Psa. 85:3 You withdrew all your wrath;
 you turned from your hot anger.

Here is a historical realism; without God, we would not have survived. The life we enjoy is not because we earned it, but because God granted it. In today's world, we often ignore this essential starting point. Whatever peace and prosperity exists in our life does not come from our political decisions or our previous military conquests; it all comes from God, as a gift. We should

² See also Willard Swartley, "International Day of Prayer and Witness for Peace (September 21)," in Dale P. Andrews, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, eds., *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year C Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 388-393.

say it again: our peace is not an accomplishment, because peace is a gift from God. This is not just a theological affirmation that attributes unseen actions to an unseen God; this is a core affirmation based on realism. We phrase it as praise but we recognize it also as a statement of our own limitations. Our actions, individually and corporately, have not led to peace. We need this humility. It's a crucial first step toward realism. We will not adequately diagnose the causes of conflict until we recognize them in ourselves, nor until we see what God does to deal with the sin that is at the heart of our conflicted and conflictual society.

Once we have experienced the realism of our deep problems, we can begin to take stock of our current situation. We need the God who has saved us in the past to save us again. We always stand in need of this salvation.

Psa. 85:4 ¶ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us.
Psa. 85:5 Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Psa. 85:6 Will you not revive us again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?
Psa. 85:7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

I believe that we need this reminder when we begin to deal with issues of peace in our current world. It's not enough to confess our past sins and then praise God for forgiving them, and to thank God for the goodness of the life we have despite our failings and our conflicts. We must recognize that our current life is in need of restoration. Our own lives are full of conflicts and times that we have turned our back on peace and wholeness; we mess up our own lives, our families, our churches, our communities, and our nations. Too often when we talk of peace, we are quick to speak of what others should do; our sermons become full of "they"-language: the government should do this, the leaders should do that, they must refrain from the use of military

action, they should find a diplomatic solution. But this language of “they” obscures our own woundedness. Worse, we begin to separate the world into “us” and “them.” “They” are the ones who need to be brought to peace, and “we” are the peacemakers who follow God. The truth remains that we need to change our own paths – and that we need to recognize that “they” are no different than “we” are. In fact, dividing the world into “us” and “them” works against any possibility for peace. When we see that God has made us one people – essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one – we begin to see that we cannot pray for others without praying for ourselves. God cannot bring peace to others without bringing peace to us. Unity is crucial as we are to embrace peace. We begin the path to peace by seeing ourselves truly, recognizing our own lack of peace, and praying for God to revive and restore us.

Psa. 85:8 ¶ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Psa. 85:9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Once we pray, we can listen. As soon as we listen, we discover that God has already been speaking, and what God says is peace. God speaks peace and people change their hearts. They gain courage and encouragement, comfort and compassion, because of what God says. The word of God is life and life-giving. Salvation is at hand, and glory is not far away.

Sometimes, we forget this. Peace seems like such hard work – our work. We have so much to do to bring peace to our land, let alone our world. But we need to remember that God has already been speaking peace, waiting for us to listen. The first step to hearing peace is to turn to God in our own hearts and to listen to what God has already been saying. Salvation is not far away. As Isaiah assures us, God has already promised: “I bring near my deliverance, it is not far

off, and my salvation will not tarry” (Is. 46:13). From as early in the Bible as Deuteronomy, God has kept reminding us that what God wants us to do is “not too hard for you, nor is it too far away” (Deut. 30:10).³ Salvation is only a step away, because God stands ready to rescue and save us – all of us throughout the world, not just those in our own communities and nations. God’s rescue brings salvation and peace. We need this reminder: salvation and peace go together in God’s work.

God’s peace and salvation are glorious. It’s rare to put peace and glory into the same thought, but the psalmist does so boldly. Speaking peace and changing our hearts leads to salvation and even to glory. This should remind all of us to recognize the extraordinary gifts of peace. Those of us who commit to peace should not only focus on condemning the paths of war and conflict, but celebrating the places of peace in this world. This is where God’s glory shines. A focus on the glory of God’s peace can also teach us the imagination and courage we need in the face of conflict, so that we can envision ways to move from wounded conflict to imaginative solutions of peace. These insights toward peace can be creative, ingenious, innovative, resourceful, and inspired. In other words, our practical steps to peace can be glorious. All of this is not far away. Peace has already been spoken by God, who waits for us to hear and echo in a glorious call and response.

Psa. 85:10 ¶ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

³ The passage of Deut. 30:8-20 is relevant to the discussion of peace. God promises that obedience will lead to prosperity, because we will then avoid other gods and find long life in the land that God chooses. Religious liberals prefer to avoid passages like this, fearing that they are too simplistic, too exclusive, too nationalistic, and too materialistic. But adherence to God’s instruction leads to peace, and peace benefits everyone with health for individuals and society. Such peace requires following God’s instruction and avoiding the alternative gods and values of the world. We would do well to reclaim passages like this for the proclamation of the good news of peace.

- Psa. 85:11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- Psa. 85:12 The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- Psa. 85:13 Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

In God's glory, we are united with love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. They all come together. But this is not just a unity of these characteristics and principles of God. This is the blessing that unfolds when God's people come together in peace and faithfulness. A path toward peace is a path toward the unity of the human family, where we can concentrate on what is good for all of us – not just some of us. Righteousness and peace kiss, just as do siblings in unity: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity" (Ps 133:1). This is peace.

I am reminded of a story from Genesis. Esau and Jacob, two brothers, lived much of their life in division and enmity. Jacob had tried to gain at Esau's expense, and it drove a rift between these brothers that lasted from childhood far into their adult lives. The relational injury escalated from a family matter to a conflict between peoples. Jacob knew that he had to heal the division, but he was afraid. When at last they saw each other, it was Esau who bridged the gap: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Gen. 33:4). Likewise, righteousness and peace kiss in celebration of the divisions repaired and the unity restored. Esau and Jacob stopped doing what was good for each of themselves as individuals, and instead chose to do what was good for them both – an act of unity, a kiss of peace, a step toward righteousness.

Righteousness may be an old-fashioned word, but it's essential if we are to have peace. Righteousness requires us to think not only of ourselves; in fact, righteousness is often the exact opposite of "doing right by yourself." It means doing what's right for others, and working toward what's right for everyone. That's why God leads us in paths of righteousness for the sake of God's

name (Psalm 23:3). Righteousness is for God's sake, because righteousness works for everyone's best interests – not just the best interest of one group, one nationality, one family, one person, one faction, one perspective. God will lead us in these paths, step by step toward peace, if we will listen to what God has been saying all along.

If we are to follow God toward peace, we know several of the steps we will take along the way: righteousness, faithfulness, and steadfast love. The avoidance of violence and the rejection of war are basic prerequisites along this path of peace. Imagination and courage are part of it, too. We will not accomplish peace through our own hard work, but that doesn't mean it's easy. We will need our hearts and our heads, and all our courage, imagination, and intellect. The scripture that God spoke so long ago is full of ancient truth of peace, and we need an adherence to this ancient word of God's good news and peace in order to find our own footing, so that our feet can be the feet of messengers of peace.

God has called us to a world of peace. But our experience is a world of conflict, and our media shows us a world of war. In practical ways, God asks us to use our hearts and heads to step into the midst of conflicts, with realistic plans that lead to an alternative world. As Christians, God calls us to propose something new – a new creation and good news of peace. Our proposals for peace need to be practical and radical, full of innovation and basic common sense. Our plans for peace need to be positive, emphasizing our goals and the possibilities, not only our fears about what to avoid. We need a different vision, a new way of seeing, so that we can step forward in paths of peace. If we are peacemakers, we are children of God (Matt. 5: 9); God has formed us and has taught us how to see the world. Because God has shaped us so profoundly, we inherit God's love for peace and God's drive toward creative peaceful work in the world.

This is our hope – and our greatest hope is the deepest expression of what is real in this world. God has called us to peace. God has called all of us to peace, Christians and the whole world alike, and God will never stop until peace is all the world's inheritance.