

Edina Morningside Community Church
The United Church of Christ
December 6, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
The Way of Peace

In speaking about this the second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday devoted to peace, Commentator, Randle R. Mixon, says: *“Advent continues; our ruminations go deeper. We wait, watch, wonder if we will ever know peace. Will we find peace in our own souls? Will there be peace on earth? Peace is the traditional theme for the Second Sunday of Advent—not just peace as the absence of violence, but peace that passes understanding, peace that heals and makes whole...”*¹

As I reflect on this notion of peace I begin with inner peace. We need first to be at peace with ourselves before we can even hope to be peacemakers in our relationships, in our communities and in the world. Inner peace comes from our spiritual disciplines of prayer, reflections on God’s word, and our lived experiences where we experience God’s love for us. It may also come like the prophet Malachi says, as a “refiner’s fire”. For me, this means that our doubt is refined into faith by giving expression to our doubt while being open to God’s wisdom. The “refiner’s fire” may also transform our experiences of loneliness into experiences of fellowship, care and being part of a beloved community. The “refiner’s fire” may also transform our fear and despair over the lived experience of injustice and the awareness of injustice in our world into – in Zechariah’s words - “righteousness before God all our days.”

Zechariah, whose song we read today for our New Testament text, was not only a prophet, a priest for the Israelites, the husband to Elisabeth, and the father of John the Baptist, but he was also an elder. Given all of his credentials, he still had difficulty believing the promises of God when the Angel Gabriel announced that his wife would bear him the child that he had prayed for much of his adult life. His disbelief caused him to have to live in silence without speaking for the entire time of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Some commentators suggest that this time of being mute and deaf may have even offered Zechariah the greatest wisdom in his long life as expressed here in the Canticle of Zechariah. This time of being deaf and mute may have been Zechariah’s “refiner’s fire”.

Hear these words from verses 72 – 75 which demonstrate how much spiritual growth Zechariah has experienced. Rather than doubting God, he offers this prophesy: *“Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors...to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before God all our days.”* (Luke 1: 72- 75) Commentator Kate Matthews Huey offers these thoughts about how becoming a father may have impacted Zechariah. She says, *“When Zechariah becomes a father, and when he sings of his joy as he gazes at his newborn son, it feels like he yearns even more deeply for peace; doesn’t the need for peace in the world, and the healing of*

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

creation, become more pressing when we have children whose futures stretch out beyond our own?"² We, too, experienced such joy and hope last Sunday during the baptism of Jay Darlene Cory. We too, experience such joy as we behold the faces of the infants in our congregation, of children who come forward during time with children, of infants and children in our families and in other parts of our lives. May all of us seek to walk the way of peace on behalf of all the children in our lives and on behalf of all the children in the world.

Whom do we turn to today as elders? I used to think that an elder had to be someone older than me. As I have gotten older, I now find elder wisdom in people who do not meet that criterion. During this year of teaching and facilitating Confirmation classes, I recognize great wisdom that can also come from our youth.

How can the elders or the wise people of the world rescue us today from our enemies? One of the wise people who guides me both in spiritual ways and in ways of defining justice in the world is Rev. Michael Piazza. He wrote in his Liberating Word Devotional a couple of weeks ago about his reflections on the acts of terrorism in Paris. He wrote: *"NOTHING justifies what happened in Paris. That is PURE EVIL, but when will evil for evil stop? At some point someone must say, "Jesus tried to offer a different way... Jesus tried to teach me to use love to stop the cycle of hate. Jesus tried to teach me that the only way to peace was for one of us to go first and that it should be me. So I will go first and forgive you and try to love you and stop the killing in the hope that you will do the same. Will you?"³*

I am sure Piazza would now add, San Bernardino, CA. if it is determined that it was an act of terrorism; or even if it is determined to be work place violence, its root cause seems to be a response to perceived prejudice; and the shooting of Black Lives Matter protesters in North Minneapolis which also can be assumed to be caused by racism and prejudice. All these acts of violence filling our hearts in this season of peace. Let us not succumb to fear, violence or hatred for the perpetrators of these acts of violence. Let us learn to walk the way of peace.

Each of us may feel like we don't have much to do with world peace. However, Piazza suggests that simply by changing our attitude from fear, anger and a desire for retribution, we can be a person who goes first and breaks the cycle of escalating violence. We can be a person who offers forgiveness and works to stop the killing. We can be a person who trusts in the power of prayer. We can simply be a person who walks the way of peace.

I close with these words from Commentator, Kate Matthews Huey: *"Such a seemingly impossible dream for us this Advent: that enemies might become friends, that emptiness might become fruitfulness, that the earth might be healed and the world might know peace. Perhaps not so impossible, for every light that breaks through, every blessing that heals our heart and gives us hope, every newborn baby that reminds us of the newness of God's tender mercies each morning, is an Advent kind of experience, a taste of what is yet to come, of sign of what God is about."⁴ May it be so. Amen.*

² http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_december_6_2015

³ Liberating Word by Rev. Michael Piazza, November 18, 2015

⁴ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_december_6_2015