

Community Church of Issaquah

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The Search for Peace

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It's very difficult to avoid the news these days, even if we try. I'm not really a CNN viewer, though I used to be. And I don't listen to NPR on the radio as I'm driving around anymore either. Last year I saw a photo of a young woman protester when the Prime Minister of Israel was here. She was in a large crowd of those opposing the war in Gaza. Holding a sign that simply said, "Peace Now," she was knocked to the ground by the police and handcuffed. I was shocked that someone who simply wanted to advocate for peace was treated in such an unpeaceful manner. Perhaps I'm foolishly trying to avoid life's reality these days, but I prefer to look elsewhere for good news or a happy story. But even when I try to avoid it, up pops a story or sometimes just a photo for protesters seeking peace or compassion for others. One thing they seem to have in common is seen on some of the signs they carry. Two words. 'Peace now.'

It seems that whenever we hear the word peace, we automatically connect it to war or conflict. Surely, all of us want that. Stop the wars and conflicts. Stop the fighting that divides our country. Stop the hateful acts that harm others. Peace. Let us just have peace. I want that, and so do many people like us who struggle with what seems to be a vacuum of peace not only in our country, but the world. But the absence of peace is closer to home than we would like.

Some churches use liturgies or portions of their services that include a segment called “passing the peace.” Many things can go wrong there, and sometimes do. I heard of one congregation in New York which fired its minister because he insisted on their passing the peace – which involves nothing more than shaking hands with your neighbors in the pews. The men and women of this small congregation had limits to their tolerance; passing the peace was beyond their limits. They could not endure shaking hands with people to whom they bore lifelong grudges. They fired the minister and found a new one sympathetic to their needs of not passing peace to those they didn’t like. The act of passing the peace requires that you shake hands with whomever is beside or near you and simply say, “peace be with you.” The other person should respond, “Peace be with **you**.” Every once in a while, someone will respond simply saying, “Peace.” Once when I visited a church that practiced “passing the peace” I was sitting beside two teenaged boys. When it came time to pass the peace, I shook hands with one of them and said, “Peace be with you,” and his response was, “*Yeah.*”

Let me share a few words from an Episcopal, Bishop Steven Charleston:

Praying for peace in times of war can feel like facing a dragon with a paper sword. But we know that is only an illusion. War is not all-powerful, inevitable or unstoppable. Its origins are in the same place as peace: in the human heart. When we pray for peace, we pray to reach the hearts of other human beings, on all sides of the conflict, to restore a sense of compassion and hope. We seek to pour the water of life onto the flames

of hate, one person at a time, until the rage subsides. So please, keep praying with me for peace, no matter how tempted you may be to despair. Confront the dragon with your love, as you work in every way you can, for the cause of peace.

Tucked into those words is one profound truth about the peace we all seek. “When we pray for peace, we pray to reach the hearts of other human beings.” The message of the Bible is simple. Love everyone. It is when we engage in the act of loving not only those around us, but strangers as well that we are able to give peace. If we are in conflict with someone and make the effort to forgive and move past, we not only give peace to that person, but we can find peace in our own life. Yet, it isn’t only making peace with someone else with whom we might be at odds.

Are we seeking peace with others? Ask yourself if you are at peace with everyone in your life. If you’re like me, I have work to do in this area, as perhaps you might as well. I’ve been told often that holding a grudge or resentment has a much deeper effect on me than on the person whom I am not at peace with. Usually that person or company or whatever has no idea that we are struggling with our inner conflicts. But in order to move past this and find true peace in our lives, we have to pray for peace to reach the heart of others.

Peace is bigger than making peace with others. Let’s turn our attention inward for a bit. What does peace mean to us? Where do we find it? The truth is, we find it in our own home, in our own lives. There has never been a time

when I have enjoyed personal conflict. There was an abundance of that growing up in a wounded family. There was plenty of that when I was forced out of the church I had chosen and that had chosen me. Those are some of the large ones. The uphill climb of each of those was to keep focused on finding peace when I needed it.

But for me, there are some inner struggles that peace seems to evade. There has been plenty of absence of peace in dealing with my spouse's medical issues of a myriad of types for over 25 years and his desire to just call it quits on life. He wants to give up and inside that dark space, I diligently pray that God will bring me some sense of peace, but I have to tell you, if peace is coming, it sure is taking its time getting here. This is the deeper peace that is even harder to find. It is our inner peace or making peace with the circumstance of our life. That, for me, is the most difficult peace to find.

We must pray for peace in our own heart. I often ask myself, "Vincent, are you at peace?" Even deeper, am I at peace with God. That's a tough question to answer. When I do ask myself that hard question, I have to admit that there are places in my own heart and mind, in my own life where I struggle with inner peace. I have to understand that if I truly want peace for all, it must begin with me as the Scriptures say, then I need to first examine what is happening in my own life. Do I have peace myself? It is certainly difficult to have inner peace when life gives you one struggle after another and you spend much, too much time with your mind racing about what will happen and what you can do and what the solution is.

None of us are exempt from difficulties that cause us anxiety and fear. I have those, and I assume you do as well. Our minds are sometimes flooded with a multitude of questions that cause us to clutter our lives with unanswered questions. What's going on? What's wrong? How can I fix that? Is this ever going to change? Questions like that. And it's when our own hearts are burdened with the unknown that we struggle to find inner peace. It's not a simple task to even address this issue. I can sit each morning in my prayer and meditation time and pray for solutions or peace, but that does not guarantee that I will automatically be at peace and worry will dissolve.

How do we find inner peace? For me, it comes down to one simple act of faith – trusting the Holy Spirit to guide me and even at times carry me through the dark times until I do find an inner peace and can stand on my own. Does it come instantly? No. But as believers, we have Scripture that advises us to “Lean not upon our own understanding, but in all our ways, acknowledge him and he will direct our path.” To experience peace in our lives, we must also be diligent about practicing our faith.

As you see, the concept of peace is a bit more complicated than we might have thought. There is worldly peace in which we want all fighting, hatred and harm to cease and to allow peace – the absence of any ungodly acts – to come to our world. Viewing the news these days, that seems to be a goal far into the future. One in which we might be saying, “Lord Jesus, quickly come back!” Second, there is the peace we must make with one another, one person at a

time. We will never know true peace as long as we carry the burden of hate, resentment or the feeling of having been used or abused.

Perhaps the most important aspect of peace for me is that I desperately want inner peace. I want my life to be freed of the burden of worry or fear. If I were to make a prayer request for me, it would be to ask for inner peace. My hope for each of us is that we will stop at some time during these hectic days and ask our Lord, Jesus Christ to show you where inner peace is waiting for us. That will indeed be your greatest answer to prayer, and my hope of resting in the arms of the Holy Spirit until peace is present for me. Where is peace when we need it? In the hands of God. In time, our Lord will open His hands and pour out both peace and hope. I'm waiting for that, are you?