

Repentance – Is Good for the Soul

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Allow me to begin with just a little history. The first documentation of Lent is found in the Council of Nicaea from 325 AD, but there is evidence that there was much earlier practice of a pre-Easter period of discipline. Hippolytus of Rome mentioned a two- and one-half week fast prior to Easter. (UCC Book of Worship) Lent, of course, is a time of preparation for Easter, and a time of repentance. Needless to say, that repentance is beneficial throughout the year, but I guess we all need little reminders. Repentance is good for the soul, a time to clear out the cobwebs of our past and look to the future anew. Considering the way things are right now I would suggest that there is a need for repentance for all of humankind, i.e., that we must repent of the fact that after so many thousands of years of human history we have not yet recognized and accepted the senselessness of war! There are better ways to resolve conflict!

As I stated in this past Sunday's sermon, the church must speak out loud and clear as advocates for peace and justice - recognizing that they walk hand in hand. There can be no true peace without the presence of justice - justice especially for the marginalized in the world and for the innocents who die needlessly in times of war.

I remember during my two years of service at the UN, how moved I was each time I crossed the courtyard past the statue of a gun with its barrel tied in a knot, and inside the beautiful "Peace Window" by Marc Chagall, and particularly, before it was returned to Spain, close to the doors of the General Assembly, hung Picasso's "Guernica", as true an indictment of war if there ever was one! Such artistic symbolism is a help. They remind us of the horrors of war, the harmonies of peace, and, hopefully, inspires us to act. But we must realize that the road to peace itself can be rough, that, "the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war." (Daniel Berrigan) Like discipleship, peace comes with a cost. It calls for commitment, and, at times, sacrifice.

Thomas Merton once wrote, "The human race today is like an alcoholic who knows that drink will destroy him and yet always has "good reasons" why he must continue drinking. Such is man in his fatal addiction to war. He is not really capable of seeing a constructive alternative to war". In Ancient Greek there is a word - 'metanoia'. It means a "transformative change of heart". A most suitable word in this season of repentance- a time to turn around, and in this case, to seek healing from this addiction to violence and to war, which are often driven by greed, hatred, and a lust for power.

It begins with each of us. Before we can create peace in the world, we must find that place of peace within ourselves - to first be the peace that we desire. Beyond that, to create peace in our homes, in our communities, in our churches...especially in our churches. Peacemaking resides at the heart of Christianity, so how must we look to the world if we hear from Jesus about the blessedness of peacemaking yet fail to maintain peace within the church itself?!

May I offer a segment of a prayer written by Thomas Merton.

"Mercifully hear this prayer which rises to you from the tumult and desperation of a world in which you are forgotten, in which your name is not invoked, your laws are derided, and your presence is ignored. Because we do not know you, we have no peace."

“God shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many people, and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks, shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4)

Peace, love, and grace, David