

The Things That Make for Peace

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So far as we know, Jesus wept publicly three times. One is recorded in the gospel narrative, as on the eve of Palm Sunday, astride that ridiculous donkey descending the slopes of the Mount of Olives with the spectacular panoramic view of Jerusalem spread before him, the echo of the crowd in his ears (“Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. . . . Peace in heaven and glory to the highest”) when abruptly Jesus halts the parade. Pausing, overlooking the city, through misty eyes Jesus murmurs, “If you only knew the things that make for peace . . . but you cannot see.”

One wishes Jesus had been more explicit. One wishes that time, or circumstance, or inclination had permitted Jesus to deliver a discourse on the things that make for peace. Much is implied, of course, from other words spoken at other times. Likewise, much that makes for peace is obvious. Still, he didn’t say it! He didn’t tell us, in words clear and incontrovertible so that forever afterward the church could say to the world, “You see, these are the things that make for peace. The Bible says, one, two, three.” We wish Jesus had told us more specifically the things that make for peace; only, he chose to leave it a mystery—or is it so obvious?

Either way, the clue comes in the phrase “the things tending to thy peace” which the *Expositor’s Greek Testament* interprets (Vol. 1:609) “You do not know the things tending to your peace = salvation.” Through the editor’s use of equal marks, the translator equates “peace” and “salvation.” Interesting translation, for the Palm Sunday scenario is peppered with military imagery. The “triumphant entry” bore all the marks of a military parade. The crowds sang praises to the “king who comes in the name of the Lord” in much the same manner as they had welcomed victorious warriors for generations. So the scene is described, appropriately, in military language for that is what “they saw” as they lined the streets of Jerusalem that Sunday morning. What they did not see, hidden from their eyes, was that Jesus was talking not “military language” but “salvation language.” It is as if Jesus had said, “You do not understand what it takes for salvation” and what they heard was “You do not understand what it takes to stop the war, to bring the boys home, to get the economy moving again.” Very simply, though they understood Jesus’ words, they did not understand Jesus’ meaning. They understood “peace” in narrow, political, military terms; while Jesus understood “peace” as being as wide as “salvation” itself, including political and military peace, but only as a sub-heading under a much more comprehensive kind of salvation which Jesus came to bring. Consequently, we must understand that peacemaking is always more than the cessation of warfare. Peacemaking, like salvation, has to do with reconciliation between all who are estranged—individuals from God, individuals from one another, groups from groups, neighborhoods from neighborhoods, na-

tions from nations. But if peacemaking is more than the cessation of warfare, it is never less than the cessation of warfare, and that is the secondary focus of this essay.

There is a story being told that reportedly traces back to one of the SALT talk negotiations, that compares the current world crisis to a football stadium crowded with spectators awaiting the start of the game. Just after the national anthem is sung, with the teams already in place for the kick-off, the announcer—with trembling voice—tells the spectators that a terrorist group has taken over the stadium. All the gates are locked. No one may leave. Everyone must remain seated. In horror, he adds that sticks of dynamite are strategically placed beneath the stands, enough to annihilate the entire stadium and everybody in it. The dynamite is set to be detonated the moment either team scores a touchdown. Then he says, “Play ball!”

It is, you see, a new game. Survival depends on devising new rules for playing the game. Nothing short of a whole different way of thinking—different purpose—different goals—a mindset that embraces a different way of winning—will save us. Nothing short of conversion will do.

Not, however, conversion in the narrowly “religious” sense of the culture, but in the broadest possible sense of utter newness. (“If one is in Christ, that person is a *new being* altogether”). “Religion” claims Michael Novak “. . . is primarily a conversion to the sense of the sacred. By conversion, I mean a focusing of one’s way of life: I mean taking up one standpoint, after having occupied another. . . . to be religious, then, is to experience the hierophany. It is to recall a day and an hour—or perhaps a slowly dawning realization during an identifiable stretch of time—where one’s sense of reality was altered. It is to be changed, to have one’s psychic center of gravity changed. It is to regard the world in a new way. It is to be oriented. It is to be centered.” (*Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*, p. 28). Nothing less than that kind of conversion, so comprehensive as to include the way we think about war, will save us. Only, therein lies the problem, because the world “knows” war is serious business with little place for preachers, except of course to bury the carnage and hopefully, to bless the war effort as the “best” way to insure the peace.

It is still amusing, and telling, that conscription poster that appeared all over England at the outbreak of World War II, declaring that every citizen over eighteen except women, imbeciles, and ministers of the gospel was to register for the draft. That old attitude that war is too serious a matter for religion is still with us, and the conversion required is one comprehensive enough to include a different way of thinking—about everything!

A riddle that was going around a few years ago makes the point. It goes like this: a man and his son were in a terrible automobile accident. The father was killed instantly. The son, critically injured, was rushed to the emergency room where it was determined that immediate surgery was required to save his life. The surgeon was summoned and quickly arrived. Only, the surgeon took one look at the victim and declared in horror, “I cannot operate on this boy, he is my son.” To “get” the riddle, one must adjust to a way of thinking different from the way most of us have been accustomed to thinking most of our lives. The surgeon, of course, was the boy’s mother.

Jesus never suggested that conversion was anything less than a total and radical change in the way one thinks about things—about everything. Nobody has been more helpful to me in pointing up the radical nature of our peace-making than Walter Brueggemann in his comments on the eighth chapter of Jeremiah. Brueggemann bores in on verse 12 which describes the religious leadership of Jeremiah's time and place. "They were not ashamed. They did not know how to blush." Then Brueggemann tells of the time he was in the sixth grade and a two-engine plane crashed in a cornfield near his house. He ran, with his young friends, to watch as the ambulance crew, with rubber gloves, lifted little bloody pieces of the passengers from the crater the wreckage had carved in the cornfield, and he tells of watching as they stuffed what they could find of those people into plastic bags. But the memory that lingers most vividly, he recalls, as he stood there staring at that crater of "human hamburger," is that of "watching a woman standing next to me holding a baby, eating an apple," and what he remembers, he says, is wondering, "How can she do that, now, here?" Only later, in mature reflection on those twelve-year-old feelings, Brueggemann says he understands his bewilderment. "She had no shame. She had no sense of incongruity, no sense of disproportion. . . ." Then the theologian charges that the greatest task of religious leadership in this country today is to help cynical Americans learn to blush at the incongruity of so much with which we are confronted. We have, in our time, he claims, all but lost our capacity to be appalled and indignant and ashamed. What a condemnation! Only, how true!

Virtually nobody in a position of leadership and power seems ashamed and embarrassed that military spending is now costing the peoples of the earth more than one million dollars a minute. The world spends an average of \$19,300 per soldier per year, while spending \$380 per school-aged child for education, and there is little embarrassment. In the world, there are 556 soldiers per 100,000 people. There are eighty-five physicians, and few seem embarrassed at the incongruity. Nuclear weapons can travel from western Europe to Moscow in six minutes, while the average rural mother in Africa must walk several hours a day for the family's water supply, and there is little blushing over the inconsistency. The United Nations calculated what it would cost to provide adequate food, clothing, medical care and education for every individual on the face of the earth, and it amounted to what the world spends on armaments in two weeks. And no one seems embarrassed. Must we not conclude that Brueggemann is right: "We have lost the capacity to blush. But," he adds, "the preacher's job is not policy. The preacher's job is to open up the deep recesses of human sensitivity, to observe there the incongruities that are eating people's hearts out." The preacher's job first of all is to resensitize his or her own eyes to the embarrassments of our days, and then to cultivate where possible a community of authentic Christian prudes who are offended to the point of rebellion by the obscenity of it all. Only, embarrassment is not innate. One learns to blush. The kind of embarrassment Jeremiah has in mind requires a reference point, some norm for shame. It is the kind of embarrassment that comes from conversion, from having one's eyes opened, from turning around and seeing for the first time. One wonders, and doubts, if there was

much embarrassment on the part of the crowds who followed Jesus during the events of that last week of his life which we call "holy"; or was there a kind of cynical numbness derived from the sense that this is the way things are, always have been and always will be. One suspects the latter. It is pure speculation, of course, but one suspects, if they were anything like most of us, that the only embarrassment they felt as Jesus halted the procession to survey the city, was that the parade might get off schedule. And so Brueggemann, again, identifies "numbness" as the dominant feeling of our time, as it was in Jeremiah's, as indeed it must have seemed to Jesus a week later surveying the crowd that encircled the cross. Brueggemann quotes Robert Lifton, who has studied what Hiroshima and Nagasaki have done to us all, as saying that the nuclear threat now is so deep and so wide and so unthinkable and unspeakable that the only way we can handle it is to grow numb, and cynical, and not to notice.

Peace begins by noticing, as salvation begins by noticing. If Easter is the paradigm event of salvation, through which we see reflected our hope, then the Golgotha event with its calloused centurians tossing dice for his garments, with its sleepy disciples on the Mount of Olives, with its fickle crowd crying "Crucify him"—Golgotha is the paradigm event of the world's apathy, through which we see reflected our despair. The way out of despair into peace is the way out of death into life. The things that make for peace are the things that make for salvation. The fundamentalists are right, of course, "*Christ is the answer.*" Only, not in any simplistic, privatistic formula so narrow as to fit on our automobile bumpers. Rather, Christ is the answer as he "opens our eyes" to those revelatory truths of God by which our sense of reality is changed. To be converted is ". . . to be changed, to have one's psychic center of gravity changed. It is to regard the world in a new way. It is to be oriented. It is to be centered." It is to see things differently, where there are new norms for appropriateness where war is not the norm, peace is the norm—suspicion is not the norm, trust is—greed is not the norm, sharing is—competition is not the norm, cooperation is—deceit is not the norm, truth is—revenge is not the norm—mercy is—hate and hostility are not the norms—love and hospitality are the norms—and finally, death and destruction are not the norms, but life and salvation are the norms.

In an absurd story, though not so absurd as our modern-day war stories with more "real" names like Hiroshima, Beirut, Belfast, Guernica, Vietnam, Munro Leaf told of a bull named Ferdinand. Only, Ferdinand was no ordinary bull. Ferdinand saw things differently. Unlike all other bulls in history and tradition, the great symbol of strength, aggression, violence and warfare, Ferdinand preferred the peaceful life of harmony and tranquility where he could enjoy the trees and the flowers. To accentuate the anomaly further, as the years went by, Ferdinand grew into a very large and ferocious looking bull. The story is familiar. When the men came to Madrid scouting for the most spirited beasts they could find in order to take them back for the famous bull fights, they found Ferdinand in the field with all the other young bulls. While the others, eager to be chosen, put on the most ferocious display, Ferdinand was content to sit in the corner of the field smelling the flowers and watching the show. Only, as Ferdinand sat down, he had the misfortune to sit on a bumble

bee which stung him mercilessly, whereupon Ferdinand rose with a great roar and began charging about, snorting and bellowing, butting the air and pawing the ground in a way that impressed the scouts tremendously. So impressed, they took Ferdinand to Madrid for the great bull fight. On the day of the contest, a great crowd assembled, for it was said Ferdinand was the fiercest bull in all Spain. Only, when the gate was opened and Ferdinand strolled into the center of the ring, amid the wild cheers of the crowd, he smelled the lovely flowers in the hair of all the lovely ladies. And Ferdinand calmly sat down to enjoy it all. Nothing the matadors or the picadors could do would make Ferdinand fight. They hit him, screamed at him, waved their red flags, poked him, but Ferdinand refused to fight, preferring the peacefulness of the spring day and the beautiful flowers. And so finally they took him back to the pasture, “. . . where he sits to this day under his favorite cork tree, smelling the flowers.”

Conrad Hyers (*The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, 150) suggests that this favorite story for children raises for adults the basic question: “What is human nature and destiny, and where is true life to be found?” (Is this not the question of salvation?) For Ferdinand’s friends, life was to be found in Madrid, in the bull fight, in the aggressive life of adventuresome combat, finally in the valiant fight to the death. Only Ferdinand saw things differently. Ferdinand noticed things the others did not notice, the simple pleasures of the pasture, the humble beauties of the flowers, the trees, the butterflies. The story has a way of cutting across the grain of the sort of “bullishness” that characterizes contemporary civilization. In a world increasingly influenced by western aggressiveness, the story offers alternative norms—stillness, harmony and peace. Listen to Hyers:

Ferdinand is no hero, but he is a very remarkable bull. He has none of those dramatic qualities that will attract the attention of pioneering, competitive, and conquering temperaments, and he performs none of those marvelous feats that might give him a name and turn him into a stirring legend. He climbs no mountains, plunges into no watery abysses, slays no dragons, rescues no maidens, outwits no gods or demons, and lays claim to no saving discoveries. Yet one suspects that in a peculiar manner all his own, he is already where the hero is trying so valiantly to get.

Jesus did not spell out the things that make for peace. Was it, one wonders, because it is such a deep mystery—or is it so obvious? Munro Leaf suggests, in his children’s story of Ferdinand, that docile, peaceful Ferdinand already possesses what the other warring bulls are fighting for. And the whole story is about as absurdly obvious as the proliferation of nuclear weapons to prevent nuclear annihilation. The only difference is children hear the story and laugh. We read the newspaper and weep, for we know not the things that make for peace.

When World War II ended, I was fourteen; but I remember a phrase that captured the mood of those days. The country was called on to “convert from war to peace.” Tank plants had to re-tool to make passenger cars again and parachute factories readjusted for ladies lingerie. Empty colleges had to pre-

pare for the flood of returning G.I.'s, family routines had to change to accommodate a father the children hardly knew. The moment peace was declared, nothing was the same. What was required was a conversion from a mindset committed to the making of war, to a mindset committed to the making of peace. Nothing less than a conversion would do. So it is today.