

“Peace: Take It or Leave It?”
Isaiah 2:1-4; Psalm 34:11-14;
Romans 14:17-19; John 14:22-27

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

As we've been working through Lent, we have been thinking about the way we, as people, struggle with the world around us and our lives together. We've talked about and thought about the nature of that life together as it relates to the communities I will be visiting: the need for reconciliation that Taizé helped us think about; the way we are called into community where we are available and vulnerable to one another, as in the Northumbria Community; to keep our eyes open to the world around us and what's going on (Findhorn); and to encourage a lasting way of life that is in following Christ (L'Abri).

The last community that I want to talk about before we go into Holy Week is the community of Iona. Iona is a little island on the southwest side of Scotland. In 563, St. Columba came to this island from Ireland after having been part of a conflict in Ireland. Depending on how you hear the story, he was either exiled or recognized that his own part in the violence was something that he wanted to get away from, to leave it behind and start anew.

When St. Columba came to the island, he created a monastery, a place of Christian community. It was out of this community that he brought Christianity to northern England and Scotland. Over the years, a number of things came out of Iona, including the Book of Kells, which is a beautiful illustrated manuscript of the New Testament. After the Viking raiders came through and did a job on coastal towns, Iona—particularly the abbey and the cathedral that he had built—was in ruins.

In 1938, there was another fellow by the name of George MacLeod who was serving as an Episcopal priest in Glasgow. He felt that his church and the people he was serving were at odds. They weren't seeing each other in a helpful way, and the church wasn't really serving the working people of Glasgow in the way that he felt needed to happen. So he came up with a vision of a way of trying to bring the church and the people together. It was during the depths of the Depression. He had workers who knew how to work with brick and stone, so he brought them together with aspiring ministers to the island of Iona, and together they built and reestablished the abbey that was there and began a community that has kept going ever since—the community of Iona. It was based on his experience of what it meant to follow Christ, to serve God's people, to bring together the church and the working people in a way that developed a community, that brought peace in his country. He struggled with seeing the injustice that was going on, the differences. He came from an aristocratic class, and yet he began to live among those who did the daily labor and felt there was an injustice. The people coming back from WWI weren't being incorporated into the life that they might expect as the heroes they were called. He was aware of that injustice.

Certainly, it was informed and guided by his experience of faith, his attempt to follow Christ. Certainly in scripture we hear that vision. In Isaiah is that incredible vision of the word going out from Jerusalem to the nations, and no longer shall nation be against nation. They will actually beat their swords into plowshares and there will be war no more. He is taking that kind of vision and asking how we live that out in a community. He is recognizing that Jesus said, “When you recognize who I am, when you come to follow me and the Spirit is at work among you teaching you and moving you, I bring you peace beyond all understanding. My peace I give to you.”

Sometimes it's easy to think about that peace simply as a peace of mind, and yet whenever Jesus brings us something, when he brings us the love of God, he doesn't expect us to simply hoard it. He expects us to share it. We are to share the love of God that is given to us in Jesus Christ. We are expected to share the peace that he gives us, to bring it to our community, our faith community, the wider community in which we live. We have the vision of scripture to bring peace. It's not an easy thing to do. After all, it's easy to come up with ways to think about violence and war. It almost seems that there's a part of our nature that goes for that exciting kind of peace, and yet Jesus wants to bring us peace. How much harder it is to think about what it takes to learn peace. What does it take to let peace be part of who we are?

I think one of the things that George MacLeod and the Iona community suggest is that you can't really have peace unless you have justice. One way to think about that is if I were passing out water and gave the first person who came some water, and the next person who came some water, and then another person comes and because I like them or for some other reason I give them more water than I gave the others, you might begin to think that was a little unfair. Why does one get more than another? Just because I decided that I like one more than the other? It feels to me that that is the root of the injustice we see. It's not so much about who deserves what in a sense that one worked harder than the other, but it's simply what context one is in. The context into which I was born allowed me to have a lot of things. If I had been born into a different context, it would have been very different.

How do we care about the people of the world? God tells us to be righteous. Righteousness, to be in right relationship with one another, is one side of the coin of justice. A place like Iona suggests that to be in right relationship with one another there has to be some equanimity and we know that God's love is not given to one over another because of all we've done or who we are. A parent's love for a child is simply because it's their child. God's love for God's world is for everyone.

When the church is arguing over what to eat or drink, Paul suggests that the kingdom is not about food and drink. It's about mercy, peace, and joy. He goes on to say when you do these things you are acceptable to God and people will notice. This is not something we just hold to ourselves, but it's something that comes out of who we are as followers of Christ that people notice. So what he says is, "As far as you are able, make peace with everyone and bring mutual upbuilding." So a community like Iona says, "Let's bring peace and mutual upbuilding to everyone." What they do to me is that reflection thing I talked about last week. How am I doing? Am I bringing God's peace? Am I accepting the peace of Christ and am I bringing that peace? Am I offering mutual upbuilding? Are we as a church, as a community of faith? Are we?

Let's pray:

Gracious God, You come to us because you love the world. You gave your only Son so that we might know your love and grace. Through that love and grace you call us to show mercy, to bring peace, to be the roots of joy, as we are part of your kingdom. Lord, help us look at ourselves, our lives, our life together, and see how we are following you. Invite us as your disciples to be those who not only know your peace, but bring your peace. As far as it is up to us, help us bring your peace and mutual upbuilding. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.