

“For Peace in God’s World” (8July18)
Eph2:13-19, Mt5:9,38-45; Ps85;
ELCA Social Statement*

It seems like the impetuses or causes to look at this Social Statement keep multiplying around us.

Just before I left for Guatemala, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton issued a letter quoting this nearly-quarter century old yet still-relevant statement, in part saying:

Citizens need to give careful attention to how we in the United States perceive our national interest...Sin’s power often makes itself felt in arrogant and self-righteous views of national identity, and in narrow, short-term, and absolute views of national interest...

In a time...when an idolatrous allegiance to one’s own community endangers our oneness, we must voice with clarity the powerful vision...to engage differences, not to ignore or fear them. The hope for earthly peace challenges people to strengthen their own particular communities in ways that promote respect and appreciation for people in other communities, for all share a common humanity.

Bishop Eaton was using the social statement in reference against the Supreme Court decision to uphold President Trump’s ban on travel from certain Muslim-majority countries. This is an example of how church interacts with our nation.

That news was overshadowing news of another vital issue, as a couple weeks ago we were finding outrage about how children were being treated at our nation’s border. The social statement applies to that, as well, calling our society and us ourselves to better behavior in loving our neighbors.

That news, in turn, surprised me as we came out from seclusion of the Boundary Waters since we’d gone in on the eve of the summit with North Korea and expected to come out hearing all about it. But even deliberations on nuclear disarmament seem to be forgotten. And that news, again!, obscured the ignoring diplomacy in order to reignite dispute with Iran. Such impetuses, begging our attention to look at this social

statement continue to explode so rapidly around us.

Still, I selected this among the set we would look at this summer before those particular headlines, and for much more fundamental reasons.

First, Peace is exactly formative of who and what we are when we gather here. In the traditional and ancient liturgy, we begin with it in repetition: In peace, in Peace! let us pray to the Lord. *Kyrie, eleison*. It comes up over and over through the liturgy, to the final words that dismiss us into the world and commission us to bear out what we have practiced while together: go in peace. Go in peace.

Perhaps most noticeably and extensively, it is at the heart of the service, the crux of our gathering when we share the peace of Christ with each other. I should talk about it more, because it is such a key moment of what we do here. It’s so much more than a brief howdy. It recognizes that it’s not how well we’re doing in relationship with each other, but that we’re related in Christ, who reconciles us. It is especially important for me with those with whom I’ve had difficulty. If that makes you concerned for if I come to offer you peace, know that I figure we need it most deeply yet again with our closest neighbors, like family members.

But sharing peace also is the moment to see that familiarity is not what binds us. Nobody is a stranger or outsider, since it is Christ’s peace that brings us together. We need to keep practicing that and living into it, week after week.

Having that feeling from worship—so intimate and so expansive and so hugely different from what the world feeds us in hatreds and differences—makes this practice true for me. That sense goes back to my deepest and earliest connection to Christianity. I don’t say connection to God, since that’s inseparable and was established before I was born and was confirmed in my baptism at 3½ months old. But in middle school, I came to see the peacemaking as unique and valuable, that the earliest Christians refused to take up the sword of empire, and yet were the

* <http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace>

ones who remained in danger to offer nursing care. This nonviolence is far braver than the cheap bravado of threats. So I was a Boy Scout leading the pledge of allegiance over the loudspeaker in my school, but with a dedication to citizenship apart from the patronizing patriotism of militarization.

I was in 6th grade during the first Gulf War. Even though the social statement says we Lutherans support discernment about just wars, that war seemed wrong to me then. Later, I was on my internship when we protested by the thousands, then watched on TV Baghdad flashing horribly with shock and awe. It has continued ceaselessly for 15 years now. That's a war longer than the whole time I'd been alive when I was coming to believe war is wrong.

This has remained at the core of my faith and was deepened in my understanding of the identity of Jesus. A friend and I started a seminary group called INViTE—Integrating Non-Violence into Theological Education. I wrote in my final seminary paper about how much more effective and cheaper (and, of course, faithful) it would be to take the ridiculous amounts we put into planes and missiles and nuclear devices—a project we name “national security” even though it is a spiral of escalating violence making us less safe—and invested instead in schools and hospitals and benefits for our foes, since what quicker way would there be to make enemies into friends?

To the ready claims that that's naïve, the counter question is when sanctions and bombs and invasions actually achieve a truly positive result. And I would ask how in the world we could have faith in those destructive practices and still claim faith in the God of love we know in Jesus. We can't fight terror without it becoming part of us. We can't well make war while trusting in a God of peace. We can't have ultimate loyalty to a flag and to God.

Even this morning, without weapons in our hands or camouflage on our backs, we are complicit. We're complicit in sending others to do that work, often our young people who come home injured in body and mind. We're complicit

in funding with our taxes. We're complicit in succumbing to idolatrous ideology. We're captive to sin and cannot free ourselves, cannot liberate ourselves, are not independent.

We need the God of love and forgiveness, I realized throughout our time in Guatemala. I was proud that some of the MCC's faithful observance of Independence Day was in a Spanish-speaking country whose poverty is in no small part because genocide came with our European ancestors, and violence supported our U.S. fruit corporations a century ago, and whose government was overthrown by our alleged “intelligence” agencies, with dictators and generals trained at our military schools for abuses of a 36-year civil war, ending only in 1996^{**}. I need to cling to the loving, forgiving God of peace in Jesus because I was in Guatemala to help build a house for a poor family, but my country is—and so I am—complicit and responsible for them being poor to begin with.

I know that's not a very pretty face on this. We often think of peace and quiet, serenity, peace with calm beauty, peace as a personal internal state. But like those early Christians, we realize this is a challenge requiring God's promise and possibility for our dedication, our fortitude, our faith.

In Guatemala, I was reading words of Archbishop Oscar Romero from nearby El Salvador, assassinated by U.S.-backed soldiers while saying the Words of Institution in worship. One passage said, “Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent oppression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism.”^{***} In that spirit of inclusive energetic generosity, when Jesus instructs us not to resist evil violently, not to retaliate with the same vengeful destruction, he instead invites us into courageous nonviolent resistance that is powerfully creative in love.

^{**} www.soaw.org/about-the-soawhinsec/soawhinsec-grads/notorious-grads/239-notorious-graduates-from-guatemala

^{***} *The Violence of Love*, p27

If you've struggled with or wondered about Jesus' words about being bullied, the background likely would help that a Roman soldier could force you to carry his pack one mile, but your first step into a second mile put him at risk for breaking the rules and so reversed who was in charge, taking the initiative away from the oppressor. Your cloak, an outer garment (Luke 6:29), might be a poor person's last collateral, and if the rich demanded to sue for that debt, Jesus suggests leaving your tunic—essentially your underwear—as well and marching out of court buck naked in protest, shaming them in your nudity. Again, turning the other cheek is the opposite of submitting as a victim of violence. You could only be hit with the right hand (since the left was the toilet hand and could not be used for any sort of interaction). A backhand slap to the right cheek showed dominance, keeping an inferior in a lower place. But by turning a left cheek, you could only be struck by a fist, a denial of being humiliated and insisting on being treated as equals, which defiantly changed either the social structure or else the desire for the powerful to risk losing their upper hand. ****

We recognize similar creative courageous challenges confronting the rule of empire with bodies taking up a cross throughout history. This spirit of dignity and life and even humor in the face of what would take it all away is godly practice. Such is the reconciliation to break down dividing walls of hostility between humanity. Such is a "world about to turn." Such is the desire to share grace and love abundantly, refusing to call others enemies or aliens, but to share the victory. Such is the peacemaking action of the children of God. Such is the enlivening of the kingdom of God. To me, this is Jesus, and I hope you'll be part of it.

PRAYERS

In peace, in peace let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy. For the wellbeing of the church of God, we pray that in these gatherings and enlivened by the liturgy of your church, you would give us faith and courage to be your children, by your Holy Spirit to mold and equip us to live as peacemakers, to practice sharing together what you would have us become and being a sanctuary in time of desperation.

We realize that battlefields cannot be fruitful farm fields, that our killing corrupts not only humanity but causes destruction for your creation. Make us your creative agents who bring about life for all.

For the peace of the whole world, we pray for the good for Afghanistan and Iran, for Iraq and Syria, for Palestine and Israel, for the Koreas, for China, Guatemala and Mexico, for all refugees who flee from a bad life and hope for better, and most especially for our nation and for us as citizens here, that we can break down dividing walls and strive on behalf of all our neighbors and seek creative solutions to sustain wellbeing.

For our personal peace, for our relationships that require reconciliation, for the threats to our own dignity or the ways we are complicit in dehumanizing others, for all that would threaten us, including fear and irrational striving for security, for the peace of our souls—body, spirit, mind.

For peace at the last, not only that we would be able to go in peace from this weekly worship, but that you sustain us in the peace the world cannot give so we trust we are in your eternal embrace through this life and far beyond it.

**** *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Walter Wink, ch.2