

WORLD COMMUNION-WORLD PEACE

Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

Today's text from Isaiah is probably one of the best-known quotes from the prophets. Both Isaiah and Micah put forth this dream of peace. All of us long for peace. Yes, we all want peace, but here's the problem: we long for peace but we prepare for war. So Isaiah (and Micah) expect us to prepare for the gift of peace. Beat your swords, they say, into plowshares, your spears into pruning hooks.

The image is of taking a sword, something made for killing, and having the blacksmith heat it, and beat it until it's a plow – made for growing food to feed our children. Or you take a spear, intended to hurt people, and bend it into a tool for making plants grow better to help feed the world. In today's world, it would be like taking a jet fighter made for war and turning it into a missionary plane to deliver food and medicine to provide aid to Puerto Rico or the Carolinas. It would be like asking US sailors and soldiers trained for battle and having them deliver supplies to victims of flooding and volcanic eruption in Indonesia.

If we want peace, we have to do the things that make for peace. Of course, preparing for peace is countercultural. It is now and probably always has been. Those who promote peace are often looked down on as naïve or weak. But when will we learn that what's truly naïve is to think that killing more people will somehow make things better? When will we learn that the truly strong person is one who doesn't have to fight? Making peace means doing the opposite of what people around you are doing. Preparing for peace feels backwards.

In his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* Kurt Vonnegut describes watching a World War II documentary that was accidentally shown in reverse: American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, German fighter planes flew at them backwards and sucked bullets out of some of the planes and crewmen. They flew backwards over a German city that was in flames.

The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes.

When they got back to base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States, where factories operated day and night, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas, who put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody again.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, says Isaiah, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

But wait...isn't there another passage from the prophets that reverses these beautiful words from Isaiah and Micah? Hear what the prophet Joel says: *Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.* In contrast to Isaiah and Micah, Joel predicted that the tools and implements of peacetime would be converted into weapons of wars. Plowshares and pruning hooks, symbols of tranquility, would be exchanged for swords and spears, symbols of war. What gives here? Even though it sounds like the prophets are contradicting each other, the truth is that Joel is looking ahead to a different phase of the "last days". Joel foresees a time of great warfare among the nations in the future. Plowshares and pruning hooks will be hammered into swords and spears, but swords and spears will also be hammered into plowshares and pruning hooks.

The fact that Joel's prophecy is the reverse of the Isaiah and Micah prophecies does not mean there is a contradiction in the Bible or that one prophet misquoted another prophet. Joel foresees a time of great warfare among the nations in the future. Isaiah and Micah foresee another time of great peace among the nations in the future.

And still we prepare for war. Whether it is war among the nations, or on the battlefields of our cities and towns. Our world prepares for war in another snippet that we hear. History is not certain who originated it, but it has been attributed to both Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin. *Those who beat their swords into plowshares will plow for those who didn't.* We hear this today from those who would push for weapons of mass destruction to be readily available to anyone who wishes to own them. And we see these weapons being used to mow down masses of innocent people with indiscriminate madness.

Doing things that make for peace can feel not only countercultural, but downright daunting, even futile. Haven't we tried this before, and where has it gotten us? As William Sloan Coffin put it, "It's one thing to say with the prophet Amos, 'Let justice roll down like waters', and quite another to work out the irrigation system".

Just because something is hard doesn't mean it can't happen. As unlikely as it once seemed, the Civil War ended and we are still one nation. As impossible as it felt at the height of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall came down and there's no more East or West in Germany. Apartheid ended in South Africa; the troubles are mostly over in Northern Ireland. Just because peace is hard doesn't mean it's not possible...or necessary.

I want to take a minute to refer to today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. We so often read this text to refer to our individual behaviors. But referring to the Last Judgment, Jesus tells his disciples that when the Son of man comes in his glory, he will gather before him all the *nations*, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. If we, as a nation, cannot find our way to make plows and pruning hooks instead of the weapons of war, where will we stand? Our nation's budget for 2018 allocates \$574 billion for the military; the State Department, responsible for diplomacy among nations, is allocated \$27.1 billion. This includes funding for United Nations programs, including peacekeeping and climate change mitigation. Until our priorities are put into balance, we cannot expect to see more plows and pruning hooks.

So what can I do, what can you do, to beat a sword into a plowshare? What can you do to make for peace? What can I do from my little spot in Hoquiam that might make a difference in the world? I'd like to give you just a few suggestions.

- Reach out to someone you have had conflict with, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Practice meditation, yoga or quiet time on some regular schedule.
- Join with others to pray.
- Contribute to a peacemaking cause. Examples: Wounded Warriors Project, Heifer International, The United Methodist Peace with Justice Program. (See me and I'll give you contact information.)
- Read a book about peace: Examples – Martin Luther King *Strength to Love*; Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace*; Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love*; Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. There are many more; perhaps you have some suggestions for others.

For now, for us today, we will come together for Worldwide Communion. This richly symbolic meal brings us in union with Christians throughout the world, where we share in the love and peace that Christ brings to the world. It marks a time of profound Christian unity, marked by our shared celebration of the Lord's Supper, where Christ calls us back together to celebrate the liturgy "in remembrance of me".

In 2015, a man named Andrew King, penned this poem:

THE TABLE WITH NO EDGES

We will sit down where feet tire from the journey.
We will sit down where grief bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs wrecked by artillery.
We will sit down where cries sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat beats like hammers.
We will sit down where flesh shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread bakes on thin charcoal.
We will sit down where there is no grain in baked fields.

We will sit down with those who dwell in ashes.
We will sit down in shadow and in light.

We will sit down, making friends out of strangers.
We will sit down, our cup filled with new wine.

We will sit down and let love flow like language.
We will sit down where speech needs no words.

We will sit together at the table with no edges.
We will sit to share one loaf, in Christ's name, in one world.

Amen.