

## “An Instrument of Thy Peace”

Isaiah 2:1-4

Richard C. Allen

May 25, 2014

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Nine centuries before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Isaiah cried out to his community: ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.’ Nine centuries after the birth of Christ, a young man from the Italian village of Assisi prayed aloud, ‘Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.’ As I sat down to work on this sermon, those two utterances found a confluence in my heart.

Through all the centuries, and up to this very day, people of faith have tried to understand something of the mind of God. Though the mind of God is beyond anyone’s imagination, beyond anyone’s reach; there are hints of God’s mind revealed in life experience, in Scripture, and in the Creation itself. Hundreds of theologians have written thousands of books on this theme: understanding the mind of God. If there is any dimension of God’s mind on which I am clear, it is this:

God’s wildest hope for humanity is for peace to reign.

And, just as clear: peace begins with me.

When the Prophet Isaiah raised up the image of a sword beaten into a plowshare, he was implying that peace has something to do with putting an end to hunger, with growing enough food such that there is no need to fight over it, with sharing the resources of the earth such that no family or tribe or nation considers doing battle in order to feed their children a nutritious meal. Indeed, feeding hungry people and teaching people how to fish form the basis of much of our mission work.

Whether it's gleaned vegetables from a local farm or feeding a meal at Peter's Retreat or advocating for conserving farm land in sacred trusts, people of faith live the prophet's vision for peace when we (to quote my Peace Corps student Diverson Chikatiko) when we chase hunger away.

Isaiah's vision of peace appears as a free-standing sculpture on the front lawn of the United Nations in New York City. This sculpture created by Evgeniy Vuchetich is stunningly beautiful. It halts me in my tracks every time. To see this work of art is all the justification one needs to make the journey to the east side of Manhattan. One gazes upon this work of art and the imagination is instantly stimulated to conjure up modern ways of beating swords into plowshares.

Now my Great Grandfather Allen worked as a blacksmith in Pomfret, Connecticut. He stood at the fiery forge and hammered hunks of metal into farm tools and into axels for wagons and all sorts of other implements related to agriculture. I never knew the man, but I have heard the stories. I consider his being a blacksmith is now part of my spiritual inheritance. His blacksmith DNA is in my bones. It falls to me to look into my own arsenal of weapons to see what I use to wound other people, and then to beat those weapons into the tools of peace.

One of the weapons I have stockpiled is the language of sarcasm. I learned this language well from my father. It is a language that wounds. It pretends to be humorous, but it wounds another's soul. Years ago, when I saw how my use of sarcasm hurt other people, I began to take that language to the forge, to heat it up and then to hammer it into another language, the language of praise. Praise is a peace-making language. Praise is a lot more fun than sarcasm. It doesn't leave the listener wondering. It deepens relationships. It establishes peace.

So, I would invite all of us to do an inventory of our arsenals; see what weapons we use to put people down; and then take those swords and spears to the forge to melt them down and to hammer them into implements of creativity. For peace begins not in Washington D.C. or in Geneva, Switzerland, but right here with you and with me.

Peace making takes such a variety of forms. I often think of peace as an antonym of chaos. Many of you, no doubt, read the article in last week's Courant about Mike Hawley and his Art Foundation, and what he is doing to enable war veterans to find healing for the chaos of post traumatic stress disorder. Mike came through our Wednesday School ministry and our Confirmation class. He graduated with many of our sons and daughters. He did three tours of duty in Iraq. When he finally landed back in Connecticut, he knew he was not the same person who had shipped out in a uniform years earlier. He had seen and heard and felt and experienced the horrors of war. His PTSD left him unable to manage any human relationship. His life had fallen into chaos. Mike, being Mike, realized that tons of his soldier colleagues suffered with the same symptoms. One night he had a vision of an art studio where veterans could gather to write poetry, to paint their emotions on canvass, to sculpt their wounds in clay, and to support each other in their healing. Today, Mike's vision is a reality. We can go to Middletown and browse in the art gallery, a living testimony to one man's choosing to work for peace, a different kind of peace, an inner-peace, a peace that is needed in the midst of emotional chaos.

I conducted Mike's wedding last December. It was a memorable occasion. The chapel was thick with gratitude for a soldier who had not only found peace for himself, but who had also become a peace-maker for many others. We often think of heroes as people who hit homeruns and score a ten at the Olympics.

Mike Hawley fits my definition of a hero because he found a way to be an instrument of the peace God intends.

So, I would invite us to be on the lookout for chaos in any of its insidious forms, and to see what we might do together to be the agents of transformation, the instruments of peace. By the way, Dr. Phyllis Tribble, my professor of Hebrew Scripture in seminary, helped us to see that the first verse of the first chapter in Genesis can be translated: “In the beginning, God began to create order out of chaos.” So, we see that from the beginning of time, God is a force for peace in the world.

I was working on this sermon Friday morning when I needed to put it aside for a few hours in order to attend ‘senior day’ at Gideon Welles School. My sixth grade guide met me in the cafeteria and escorted me to the first stop on the tour, a short concert by the school’s string ensemble. Cellos, violins, violas, and one string bass played beautifully, elegantly, with spirit. They played the Pachelbel Canon in D; Do, Re, Mi from The Sound of Music, and several other lively selections. I watched these 11 and 12 year olds making music together. Frankly, I was astounded. Their music touched my soul. It’s good I remembered to take a hankie with me that morning. As I drank in the music, I couldn’t help but think: ‘so this is what peace is all about: boys and girls playing music that penetrates the soul.’ There was, of course, a standing ovation.

Later, I thought of taking that 6<sup>th</sup> grade orchestra to the Israeli Palestine border, to the Russian Ukrainian border, to the Congolese Sudanese border, to all the hot spots on the globe. If music can melt the heart of an aging Yankee, New England pastor, music has a chance of melting the hearts of militants in war-torn countries.

I am convinced that to make music is to make peace. Give me a rocket or a grenade or a missile, and I'll take it to Grandfather's forge, melt it down, and make a trumpet and a saxophone and a flute, and we'll make music together; we'll be instruments of peace.

That's how the Prophet Isaiah was speaking to me this week. "They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." With the Prophet of old, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.