

Joshua 24:14-18
Acts 20:31-38

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 20, 2010

Children, Children, Why Do We Fight?

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare. *Jeremiah 29:7*

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. *Romans 12:18*

They were taxiing toward the runway in a substitute aircraft, when from his perch behind the second pilot in the cockpit of the Lancaster bomber he saw their own aircraft, call name "Victor," coming back from repair, after being rather badly shot up a couple of days before. It made them all feel a bit odd, like leaving a family member behind. Besides, every aircraft even of the same type has a different feel, and this one felt—*different*.

Later that night, on a bombing mission of Chemnitz in NE Germany, they collided with one of their own aircraft that couldn't keep altitude after releasing its payload. Seven of the crew, except the navigator and pilot, a Canadian, Flt Lt. Excel, parachuted to safety. My Dad narrowly missed landing in the Zschopau River, in the dead of winter, landing mercifully in a snow bank. Sewn inside the lining of his flying jacket was a minutely detailed silk map of Germany. Knowing that Russians held much of Poland, and were perhaps fifty miles away, he found hiding places by day and moved alone by night, trying to make it to the Russian line. But on the second night he was captured by farmers when their dog alerted them. Within seconds they had a rope around his neck and slung over a limb, planning to hang him. At the last second a German home guard officer rode up on his bike, stopped the lynching, and took my Dad into custody.

My Dad was taken to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp for allied airmen, from which the famous "great escape" took place. He was there only a very short time. The Russians were a mere twenty-five miles away, and fearing reprisals for Stalingrad, the Germans began evacuating all POW camps in the North East. The Stalag Luft camps were already perilously low on food and clothing. Now, in the depths of winter, the guards turned the POWs out at midnight on a forced march south. Temperatures were estimated that night to be as low as seventeen degrees Fahrenheit. Many POWs would die on those marches of starvation, exposure and disease. Knowing that the war was in its last gasps, the Germans intended to meet up with Patton's Army as it came in from the South and West, which is what happened, after 400 miles, in Moosburg, but only after an excruciating ordeal.

When our mother saw Dad months later, several weeks after VE Day, she said he looked like a survivor of a concentration camp, as gaunt as a rail and with a great distended stomach from over consumption after the starvation. He would suffer medically for the rest of his life,

until he died in October, 1984. I was born in July, 1946, and named, as you've no doubt guessed, after the aircraft in which he flew all his missions, except the last.

On that march, which is now well documented from survivors reports, published in 2002 in a compelling book called *The Last Escape*, an elderly German woman at one point came shuffling through the snow toward the ragged line of POWs, and tugging at the filthy sleeves of the men, cried out to them as if they were her own, "Children, children, why do we fight?" She spoke in that moment as few others have, for all humanity.

She asked a question that has yet to be answered with conviction. For we can be a startlingly schizophrenic species with a disturbing capacity to embrace the notion of peace while visiting horrible acts of violence upon one another. Consider, for example, that on Christmas Eve, during the Nuremberg trials, some thirty war crimes defendants gathered in the prison mess to sing Christmas songs, including that most pacific of carols "Stille Nacht" or "Silent Night." While in the historic courthouse of the Palace of Nuremberg, the international tribune of judges sat below two carved tablets on which were numbered the Ten Commandments, in the iconic heartland of a nation committed to warfare and genocide. Yet, among those proceedings, where sublime carols soared from the highest echelons of the Nazi party, as victims with black ringed eyes listened to charges that catalogued their insufferable torment, the Spirit of Jesus lingered. He whose moral purity is beyond comprehension. His heart full toward every fallen man, woman and child. Even more so when faced with the incomprehensible wretchedness of human evil, as when allied forces stumbled into the death camps. To each—captor and captive, Christ still offers the same barely conceivable love and invitation.

What is the secret of living peaceably? It is cultivating a personal lifestyle that honors peacemaking. When the people of Israel were in exile for forty years in Babylon, they cried out again and again for relief. The psalmists of the period gave them Psalms that promised release someday, but the people complained,

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows—there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'. . . .
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

So the prophet Jeremiah gave them this astonishing word from God.

seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare

And to the church in Rome, toward which his life was tending, unto death, the Apostle Paul wrote: "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

If you've read Kurt Vonnegut's novel of World War II, *Slaughterhouse Five*, you may recall the scene where Billy Pilgrim, the central character, watches a movie about American aircraft bombing a German city. But Billy's sense of time is all mixed up, so that he sees the film backward. A German city is in flames then, as the firestorm shrinks, the bombs rise upward to be embraced through the open bomb doors of the aircraft. Then the American planes, loaded with corpses and the wounded shot down by anti-aircraft fire, fly backward to land in Britain with all crews in good health. The bombs are sent back to America, where they are dismantled and their destructive ingredients buried once again in the green earth. The effect is to underscore the stupidity of war's destruction, which could and ought to be reversed.

Now, I know there's an unfinished piece to my dad's story. Why, on the night of his capture, would civilians so passionately want to kill a lone English airman. It wasn't until about three years ago, reading Paul Johnson's *A History of the Modern World*, that it occurred to me why the farmers wanted to kill him. Just two weeks before, allied bombers destroyed the historic city of Dresden, as perhaps 40,000 people died in a single night. Dresden was only twenty miles to the east. It was Churchill's 'Hiroshima', a desperate attempt to break the will of the German people. Violence begets violence.

The peace that Jesus maintained starts from the divine core of the human heart (we are made, after all, "in God's image"). It flowers with the choices we make, what to watch on T.V., what we read, how we react to difficult people and challenging situations, what we pray for (if we pray!), how we start our day—in a flurry of tense activity, or with time set aside for a few verses of Scripture and prayer. Whether we act defensively, or seek a better way—I discovered years ago that most questions don't have just two answers, one right the other wrong, but that there are a lot of hidden answers in between, and outside the box. Whether we take more time to listen than to speak. Whether we cultivate silence. Whether we have a tendency to surprise a colleague or loved one with unanticipated acts of kindness.

Again, in the spirit of Christ, to make peace,

“seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you;
so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.”

“And the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, be with you all.”

Amen.